

**From the Pulpit of
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SARASOTA FL**

One Thing is Necessary

The Rev. Craig A. Miller

Luke 10:38-42
July 17, 2022

Are you a Mary or a Martha? I don't know if you have ever been asked that before, though it sounds from your response that it is likely you have been asked that question by a preacher. Martha is the doer; Mary is the, well, the one who is content to let Martha be the doer. Maybe Mary is more the contemplative, the student, the bookworm. Raised in the same family, Mary and Martha were very different personality types.

Have you taken a Myers-Briggs personality inventory? Do you remember your initials? To the likely surprise of many of my clergy colleagues, I have never done a full work-up of the Myers-Briggs study. I've done an abbreviated version that I found online one time, but I don't remember all my initials; I don't even remember what all the initials mean. Amazing, I know, but there it is. I do know that I tend to be an introvert rather than an extrovert, as do many pastors. For those who don't know the definitions, an introvert is not someone who is shy or doesn't want to be around people, and an extrovert is not someone who is a social butterfly. An introvert can do very well being around people, but finds that he or she or they then need some quiet time, to regain their energy and to recharge, while an extrovert, after a period of quiet time, needs to be around people to regain energy and equilibrium, to recharge. Most people tend to find themselves pretty close to the center line, maybe a 55-45 split between introvert and extrovert. It isn't really an either-or situation. Nor is it really an either-or situation with being a Mary or a Martha. So if you have labeled yourself in that way, perhaps you will want to re-think that.

In a similar way, there have been a lot of discussions, debates, even arguments in churches regarding whether the biggest role of the church should be that of evangelism or social justice. We do ourselves a disservice if we put that in either/or terms. And we do our calling, our purpose, a disservice if the church focuses only on one of those two areas. It's really about being Mary *and* Martha.

We don't know if the two sisters invited Jesus over for a meal, or if he just dropped by one day. But while he was in their home, Martha was very busy. Maybe she was running the vacuum cleaner or dusting the furniture. Maybe she had to wash the dishes before they ate. Maybe she decided that she really needed to re-hang the drapes. Or maybe she was intent on making a really nice lunch or dinner for Jesus. You know what it is like when you have someone special over for a meal. Think of the time you spend cleaning the house and making sure everything looks just right. Think of the time you spend not only preparing the meal, but how much time you spend *planning* the meal. A lot of work goes into a special meal, right?

So there's Martha being her busy self, and after a while she realizes that she's the only one putting out the effort. Her sister Mary isn't pitching in. Mary didn't even offer to set the table. She was just sitting there listening to Jesus. Martha works; Mary sits. Martha is not happy. So Martha speaks out. "Lord, I'm working my fingers off trying to fix a decent meal for you, and

my sister has yet to help me. Talk to her, would you please? She'll listen if you tell her to get up and help me."

You know, if Jesus came to my house one day, I don't think he'd be thinking about what kind of meal I might feed him. If Jesus came to my house one day, I think it would be because he wanted to talk with me, to talk about ministry and life, and how better to follow him, how to more fully be a servant of Christ. And if I didn't spend time with Jesus, if I was caught up in making sure the house was just so and the food was well-prepared, well, that doesn't say a lot about my relationship with Jesus, does it?

"Martha," Jesus said, "you are distracted by many things." That is really the issue here. Jesus was in the house, and Martha was more focused on other things; she was distracted. Do we ever get distracted when Jesus is in the house?

A number of years ago I took a two-week course in the Orlando area. The class went from 9 in the morning to 8 or 9 at night, with a break for lunch and a break for dinner. Pretty rigorous. In that class we were given a one sentence Scripture passage, and we were told to focus on that verse, center our minds on that verse, and remain quiet for one hour, just thinking about that Scripture verse and letting our minds and spirits dwell on that verse. Because of my affinity for being near water, I walked to a small pond – the class was held at a retreat center – and thought that would be a good place to be for the exercise. I'll tell you, the first 10 or 15 minutes, talk about distractions. My mind wanted to go all over the place, and one of the things I was thinking was that it would be hard to be quiet for an hour with nothing to read or write, just one Scripture verse in my mind. But then I settled in, enjoying the quiet, letting the verse have its way with me. After an hour I went back to the classroom, and as I walked in people were talking. I felt like saying, "Please be quiet!" The conversations seemed like such an intrusion on what I had been experiencing, on the thought that Jesus was in my house and I didn't want any distractions.

When you sit down to pray, or to read Scripture, or to worship, or to listen to a sermon, what are some of the distractions that come upon you? Have you ever found that you look at your feet and realize you are wearing two different color socks? Or that there is a stain on the skirt you are wearing? Maybe there are things in the sanctuary that seem a bit out of order to you. Maybe it is the sound of little children making little children noises (which I notice, but I celebrate having children in worship). Maybe it is the person with whom you are at odds, and you are thinking that the other person needs to take the necessary steps to fix the situation. In some churches I have served, one of the things that distracted some people was the fact that the worship service might go longer than an hour, so they kept their eyes on their wristwatches. "God is in God's holy temple," we read in Habakkuk, "let all the earth keep silence before him." People might add parenthetically, but only for 60 minutes, no more. And maybe we are thinking to ourselves, "I hope the service doesn't go too long because we want to get to the restaurant before the Methodists do." Distractions.

We all get distracted; that's normal. But what do we do with the distractions? Do we allow them to keep us from listening to, and listening for, God? Do we allow the distractions to keep us away from focusing on the truth that Jesus has come to our house not for a meal but to be with us, to teach us, to strengthen us, to lead us, to call us, to grow the relationship deeper?

Last week we talked about the parable of the Good Samaritan, but we really talked about the man in the middle of the road. At the end of the parable Jesus asked the lawyer – and lawyers back then were the equivalent of students of theology today – who proved neighbor to the man in need? The lawyer replied, "The one who showed mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do

likewise.” So we look for ways to show mercy to others; we look for ways to go and do. It is as though we leave the sanctuary looking for ways to be merciful. Then Luke tells us this situation with Mary and Martha, which is a reminder that while we are called to go and do, we are also called to be still, to listen, to allow the Spirit to deepen our relationship with Jesus. There is to be a balance between the two, a both/and kind of thing.

I know there are some Roman Catholic orders where priests and nuns are basically set apart from the world, effectively isolated from the world, where they pray and worship in their chapels, but they don't really get out into the community to serve. I think there is some value in having some people regularly praying for the community and the world. But for most of us, being totally contemplative without any kind of service seems to ignore what Jesus said about caring for others, including and especially the lost, last, little, and least. And doing all the social justice ministries without taking time for prayer and reflection and contemplation and worship leads to burn-out, or can turn into something that is done without recognizing that one is doing those things in the name of Jesus. Go and do needs to be balanced with sit and listen and reflect.

So Jesus says to Martha, “Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” I don't know if that means that Jesus did not need the elaborate, four-course dinner that Martha was preparing, that a sandwich would have been fine, or if he meant that *while he was in the house*, it was more important that people listen to his message, that people be attentive to him and his presence with them, that there was ample time to “go and do.” Remember that in the midst of his busy ministry, Jesus took time to be still, to be silent, to pray, to listen. In Ecclesiastes 3 are the very well-known words (well-known mostly from the song, not from being in the Bible), “to everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance. We could add, “There is a time to go and do, and a time to sit and listen.”

Be still. Listen for God, for Jesus. Allow Jesus to be present with you, to speak to you, even to transform you. And go and do. But all of it in balance.