

Luke 10: 38-42

Now as Jesus and his disciples went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Many people are troubled by today's gospel.

Good Christian folk are disturbed that hard-working Martha gets criticized...
for trying to serve Jesus and wanting Mary to do her fair share.

What a blow this passage is to the "Protestant" work ethic!

Those who favor gender-specific roles for men and women are disturbed...

b/c the one who doesn't seem to know that her place is in the kitchen...

is commended while the "good housewife" is condemned.

Oddly enough, some feminists are also disturbed:

Martha seems to be rebuked for her sharp tongue while Mary is praised...

for kneeling down at a man's feet and keeping her mouth shut.

If you find yourself disturbed by this story, then, you're not alone.

In fact, generally, if you're not disturbed by Jesus' actions and parables,
you're not paying attention.

Jesus wants to get people to look at life differently,

and the only way to get people out of their old ways of thinking and...

begin viewing life from the perspective/kingdom is to shock them.

Martha is a good and faithful servant.

When Jesus stops in during his journeys, she knows what he needs:

he needs to be cleaned up from the dusty road, and he needs to be fed.

He'll also need a clean place to rest.

So, like the Good Samaritan in last week's gospel,

Martha sets to work to care for the person in need.

But this week's story isn't about showing love horizontally ...

by caring for one's neighbor.

This time, we're to be told how to express love vertically (b/t us and God).

We show our love for God in the way Mary did:

by kneeling at the feet of our Lord and listening.

Let's think for a moment about the first readers of this story.

The writer of Luke lived after the first generation of Christians had died.

His audience had never met Jesus.

They grew up hearing the stories of people who claimed to have heard him speak, or at least of people who knew people who had heard him.

Can you imagine how jealous they were, how much they'd have given...
to have actually seen him and listened to him?

We'd love to sit down w/ Jesus, too; we have a lot of questions we'd like to ask.

Can you imagine how jealous we'd be of someone who had met him?

I met Lefty Gomez once.

He pitched for the New York Yankees baseball team from 1930 to 1943...

and was inducted in the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1972.

Babe Ruth was still on the Yankees team in 1930.

It was so strange to be able to talk to someone who knew Babe Ruth!

You know what I asked him?

I asked him why, on every level of baseball, the 1st baseman is thrown a ball...
by one of the coaches just before he enters the dugout!

The obvious answer is that the first baseman uses this ball to warm up...
the other infielders between innings, after his team finishes batting.

But why can't he just grab a ball for himself,

or why doesn't a batboy hand him one in the dugout?

I figured: if Lefty Gomez has been associated with baseball since time/Babe Ruth,
he must know where this odd custom came from.

He thought a minute, and then said, "I don't know. I never thought about it.

We always did it, though."

Fortunately, there was also a veteran Toledo sportscaster there, who said,

"That's a great question. The best guess is that it started back in the days when...
infielders left their gloves on edge/outfield grass behind their positions...

and a coach would throw a baseball out to the 1st baseman...
when inning was over.

He would put it in his mitt and keep it there...

so he had a ball to use to warm up the other infielders when he returned.

The practice stuck, and people were too superstitious to stop doing it."

So, the ball is always thrown out before the first baseman reaches the dugout.

Obviously, the church isn't the only place where people lose track...

of why they do the things they do but continue doing them anyway!

Now, of all the things I could have asked Lefty Gomez, this was a pretty silly question.

What I'd have really liked to know is what sort of a person Babe Ruth really was.

Did the man match his legend...

or were his exploits on and off the field just creative PR?

I would guess the 2nd generation Xians had pretty much/same questions about Jesus.

Was he really all they said he was?

If they could just sit down with him for a few minutes....

Now, imagine their response when they are told by writer/Luke about Martha and Mary. Jesus does visit them. And what does Martha do?

She runs around like a madwoman, cleaning the house, cooking, screaming at Mary to get to work, ordering Jesus to tell Mary to help.

Martha was undoubtedly a very funny character to second-century Christians.

The Lord comes calling, and all she can think to do is clean and cook?

Mary's response is the reasonable one. She wants to hear all Jesus has to tell her.

What Jesus is saying to Martha is, "Sit down, Martha. Listen to what I have to say.

Don't yell at your sister for wanting to hear me.

After all, I've come a long way."

The story of Mary and Martha, then, is funny in some ways.

But it is also deadly serious.

In Luke (21:34) Jesus warns that we have to be on guard...

that the worries of this life don't weigh down our hearts because, in this condition, the final day can come and catch us like a trap.

Martha was definitely weighed down by the troubles of this life...

and, often, so are we.

Martha would say that a visitor needs to be fed; we would say that bills need to be paid.

Jesus would say: the urgency lies w/ the coming kingdom not w/ bellies & finances.

A stomach doesn't stay satisfied very long anyway,

and all that we buy with our money will pass away.

We have need of only one thing:

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

Mary understood this better than Martha.

What Martha lacked was a singleness of vision.

Jesus tells her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried/distracted by many things."

How about us? Do we keep our focus on the kingdom during the week...

or are we *occasionally* distracted by worldly matters?

How about on Sundays?

Do we give even one day solely over to God and spiritual matters?

Or do we have other things planned today?

We don't fight over nonreligious matters getting ready for church; do we?

Surely, we've never argued on the way to church!

Okay, how about one hour? Do we keep the distractions at bay for even one hour...

so that we can put our full attention into worshipping God?

Surely we don't worry about the heat, the uncomfortable seating,

what other people are doing, whether there are mistakes in the bulletin,
whether we know or like the hymns,
whether the pastor went too fast or on too long w/ the sermon?

I'll tell you what I think about: I want to do a good job on Sunday morning.

I want to give a good sermon/keep the mistakes during the service to a minimum...
because, after all, this is my job.

And sometimes, with all this attention on doing well, I forget to worship with you.

Even pastors struggle to give one hour to God...
free from the distractions of worldly things.

Let's make this very clear: the distraction is not the mistake the pastor makes,
or the baby's cry, or the discomfort.

The distraction is our reaction to these.

We let the mistake cloud our minds, the baby's cry stir our emotions,
the straight-backed pew wreak havoc with our bodies.

Rather than looking at these through the eyes of the kingdom,
we view these happenings as the world views them.

To the world, a mistake is worthy of censure, a child should be seen and not heard,
and physical discomfort is simply unacceptable.

In kingdom thinking, mistakes reveal our common humanity,
children must be heard because none of us shall see the kingdom...
unless we become as children,

and physical discomfort is a small price to pay for spiritual fulfillment.

Those who live in the kingdom now have a single-mindedness about life.

Jesus Christ is the center of their life,
and all of their actions revolve around this center point.

Getting back to Martha: what she didn't know, and what we forget,
is that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

Jesus came to serve by teaching and by dying for sins.

In her frantic attempts to do good work,

Martha was missing out on what Jesus had to tell her.

Sometimes even the good work of the church can be distracting...
if it interferes with one's listening to the Word.

There's always so much for us to do here.

But we come to church so that the Word of God can happen to us here:
one word from Jesus can change us forever.

This is a time when we stop the mad dash and take time to listen.

Of course, if good deeds don't follow the time we spend here, then we have not heard.

But those who attempt to do right and be "good people" without going to church...

or centering their lives on the gospel of Jesus Christ...

are like beautiful ships w/o rudders, moving ahead but going nowhere.

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”