

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, Wisconsin
The Rev. George Arceneaux
July 17, 2022

Sources:

Luke 10:38-42

Craddock, Fred B., John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker. *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year C*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1992.

Brown, Raymond E. *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. New York etc.: Paulist Press, 1979.

This morning I'm remembering an insight from a New Testament Greek professor I had who said, "Remember, George, more often than not, the more difficult interpretation of scripture is very often the best one."

And I'm reminded of this guiding principle this morning because Luke's story of Mary and Martha is one of the most oversimplified stories in the New Testament. There's a tendency to liken ourselves to being like either the free-spirited Mary or the practical Martha.

The story of Mary and Martha has tempted readers in the past to put themselves in one of two camps, and in similar simplicity to decide that Jesus sides with Mary over Martha. Yet I think a more challenging read might prove just the opposite that Jesus isn't saying that Martha should be more like Mary out of some punishment or chastising statement to devalue what Martha is doing, Jesus is not playing favorites.

In reality, I think Jesus is hoping to lead Martha, and us, to lay down our burdens and to invite greater kindness for ourselves. I hear in this Gospel story that quotation from Ferris Bueller, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

Of course, it's easy to read Jesus' words as a chastising rebuke of Martha and it's easy for me to get worked up in response to Jesus' words because, based on the things we've been hearing from Jesus in Luke, Martha is doing exactly what she is supposed to!

Last week we read through the story of the Good Samaritan a story about serving your neighbor in hospitality in the extreme. Jesus describes how the Samaritan, a person who would have been immediately loathed by his audience and presumably the man in need on the side of the road, went, performed first aid, poured oil and wine on the man (which by the way would not have been cheap), put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn, stayed with him overnight, gave the innkeeper the equivalent of about a hundred bucks to care of this guy and THEN said that if the man incurred any additional cost, the Samaritan would come back and cover it. Jesus ends that story, last Sunday's story, by saying go and do likewise.

So Martha tries to do likewise, tries to serve her guest's practical needs. Yet Jesus says to Martha, "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."

It feels like Jesus is contradicting himself; saying that we should act as extremely hospitable as the Good Samaritan while also telling Martha not to be worried about so many things. But instead of pitting these two readings against one another, I think instead that they invite us to the humility of knowing our limits, and the need to set aside our burdens. And to be.

Jesus sees the burden of responsibility Martha bears and I think asks us in kind, what are we holding that weighs us down?

What are you holding that feels heavy? For Martha, it was that list of household tasks, but for you what is it? It might be a project at work, it might be a worry about your finances, it might be a feeling of self-doubt or shame or guilt or hurt. Set it down if you can. I don't think Jesus would deny whatever it is you hold, wouldn't deny that thing's weight or the work associated with it. I know Jesus tells Martha she's worried about too much in that moment, but I guarantee that if Martha stopped working on dishes they'd still be waiting for her and Mary after Jesus left. Christianity is a religion that says a lot about burdens, Jesus literally says that we need to take up our cross and follow him. But he also says that his yoke is easy and his burden light. This is the same man who knew to pray by himself in a deserted place to rest, who openly welcomed the joy of children in his company, whose last act as a free person before he died was to share a meal in love with his friends.

I don't think Jesus is belittling Martha's worries and I don't think Jesus would invalidate the responsibilities and burdens of our lives. Jesus sees Martha's worry; sees her burdens. And he sees ours too.

So much of our lives, we'll carry so much. And Jesus absolutely tells us that we do need to work with those burdens in our lives. Yet he reminds Martha as well as us that it is so important to set those burdens aside from time to time and simply be present to the world and its joys.

If you need to, hold whatever you're holding but if it makes sense, set whatever burdens you aside for the rest of this service. Heck, treat yo' self and keep it set down through coffee hour. When you're ready pick it back up if you need to, I and this community will be here to help you pick it back up and bear it. But till then, rest in the peace of this time together. It won't be taken from you.