

Busy: Restoring Connection to an Unhurried God

Time to Stop

Now as they 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." (Luke 10:38-42)

Most people I know consider Jesus to be a pretty fair-minded kind of guy, at least until they consider the story of Mary and Martha. What do you think?

One day Jesus visits a certain village where Martha welcomes him into her home. She has set up an ancient equivalent of a meet-and-greet for him. Martha's house is packed with curious villagers who have been hearing of Jesus for quite some time and never had a chance to see or hear his words of wisdom for themselves. As the convener of the party, Martha has quite a task at hand. Ancient hospitality customs dictate that she make the guests feel at home, which includes providing food and drink. Any of Martha's female relatives would have been expected to help her in the kitchen while the others recline and enjoy conversation.

So Martha's scurrying around preparing cheese plates, gathering olives, figs, and dates into bowls, making hummus, baking flatbread, and refilling water pitchers and wine glasses. As she works, she expects her sister Mary to help, but Mary is quite content simply to sit at Jesus's feet and take in his wisdom.

Martha is a little perturbed. After waiting expectantly for Mary's help, Martha is fuming. Bursting out in front of everyone, Martha exclaims, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

One might expect Jesus to have a little compassion for his host. One might even envision Jesus gently scolding Mary, reminding her to "Do unto others" or that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." Nope. Instead of scolding Mary, Jesus reproaches 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."

Many people who read this passage object to the way Jesus handles the situation. They passionately defend Martha, asking why Jesus doesn't seem to have a modicum of sympathy for someone who's throwing a party—for HIM—and is working her tail off to provide hospitality—on HIS behalf. Martha has to work twice as hard because her sister is sitting idly by, listening to

Jesus as if she's one of the invited guests. Surely, Martha would have loved a few moments at his feet, too, but she was too busy taking care of everyone else, including her sister.

Worried and distracted. That's what Jesus sees when he looks at Martha fussing around in the back. She's a busy and distracted woman. We all feel a bit of the offense that Martha would have in being called out in this way, don't we? We run from activity to activity, obligation to obligation, all because we're trying to be good people, put food on the table, and live as respectable contributors to society. Hopefully we're also trying to be disciples of Jesus. We hear Jesus scolding *us* when he says, "you are worried and distracted by many things ..." We want to respond, "But I was only doing what I thought you wanted from me to begin with!"

If everyone were like Mary, would anyone ever get any work done? We'd all be sitting idly by expecting *someone else* to do all the hard work, only there would be no one else. To privilege Mary over Martha seems like the ultimate in naïveté, endorsing a whole system where people feel entitled to anything they want without working for it.

Well, catch your breath if you're adding your voice to these objections. One mistake we constantly make with Jesus is taking his words, which were uttered in a particular time and contextual situation, and thinking that he's speaking to every time and every situation.

For example, when Jesus sends out his disciples, instructing them to venture into the countryside carrying no bag, no purse, and no sandals, many think he's speaking about what's expected of all of his disciples for all time. We're supposed to give away everything we have if we are to be *true* followers of Jesus. (That's what St. Francis thought.) Yet at another time, Jesus commands his disciples to take up their purse and bag, and if they don't have a sword to get one (Luke 22:36). While Jesus's words of wisdom tend to stand for all time, this doesn't mean we can ignore the context he was speaking within and apply it to every situation.

Think about our present story for a moment as if it happened today. If Jesus were literally to come to *your* home to discuss his thoughts on life, what do you think would be more important for you to do as host: make sure everyone got brownies and coffee, or make sure everyone *including you* was able to feast on every word Jesus had to say? Remember, this is *Jesus* we're talking about, not some minor philosopher!

In Martha's day, she couldn't simply say, "Oh, they're videotaping his talk so I'll just catch it later." You couldn't even look up Jesus clips on YouTube. This may be the only opportunity she will ever have to hear Jesus speak in such a small, intimate setting. Are hummus and pita really so important?

Of course, Martha might object that it was out of her high respect for Jesus that she sacrificed her opportunity to sit at his feet and provide him a few figs and dates. Yet how respected do you suppose someone like Jesus felt to have someone essentially saying, "I've got more important things to do than listen to what you have to say?" Is it not Jesus who once told the devil, "Man

shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4; Luke 4:4). And he said this after going without food for forty days!

In privileging Mary’s idleness over Martha’s work, Jesus wasn’t privileging idleness as a permanent ideal, or putting down all work as unnecessary. He was privileging “keeping the main thing the Main Thing.” When he was speaking, the Main Thing was to set aside whatever you were doing and listen. How else were his words to be heard, remembered, and passed down to later generations?

In his book, *The Contemplative Pastor*, Eugene Peterson speaks to one of the largest communities of “Marthas” on earth: Christian ministers. Many ministers take pride in being busier than the average person, and letting people know just how busy they are. Yet Peterson thinks this is craziness. He compares the best “work” of a pastor to a particular person in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Do the following words apply only to pastors?

In Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, there is a turbulent scene in which a whaleboat scuds across a frothing ocean in pursuit of the great, white whale, Moby Dick. The sailors are laboring fiercely, every muscle taut, all attention and energy concentrated on the task. The cosmic conflict between good and evil is joined; chaotic sea and demonic sea monster versus the morally outraged man, Captain Ahab. In this boat, however, there is one man who does nothing. He doesn’t hold an oar; he doesn’t perspire; he doesn’t shout. He is languid in the crash and the cursing. This man is the harpooner, quiet and poised, waiting. And then this sentence: “To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not out of toil.” (The Contemplative Pastor, 24).

In each of our lives as individuals, there is a time and place for rowing, and one for harpooning. Sometimes, you’ve just got to buckle down and trudge away with all your might. Other times, you’ve got to set down your oar, no matter how many people complain about your “shirking your responsibility” to stop, *breathe*, look around, and listen. Otherwise, you may miss whatever you were rowing so fervently to catch. Or worse, that which lies beneath the turbulent sea may come up from under you and overturn your boat. (That’s a great metaphor for what our soul does to us when we’re not attentive to it, by the way!) My rowing metaphor is also on the dragon boat. If you have raced or been in sport that time right before the horn is critical. You have to be in the zone, completely focused and if you or anyone else on the boat is not potentially the whole race is thrown. Stop, breathe, listen, pause... so that you can go when the time is right.

As soon as I started this sermon I thought about last week’s sermon and I continued to look at my life. A few people have said “I know you’re preaching to me.” (they have said it over the years but I have definitely heard it a few times in the last couple of weeks. The reality is I am preaching to all of us, myself included. I know most of you know I’m a Martha. It’s true and I hear the truth of Jesus’ words so completely. I can spend so much time and energy trying to make sure everything is perfect that I miss the moment. My girls say to me often please just sit with

me, please just cuddle. My soul says to me often please just sit with me, please just cuddle. A huge warning call hit me last week when I was away hosting a retreat. I had brought in another leader which I thought was a very good idea and a group of us clergy were sat and fed as we walked through the lessons of Holy Week. When it came to holy Saturday we were all to sabbath in silence. Fortunately we were told not to be too hard or too judgemental on ourselves ahead of time because I failed miserably. We were told to be lazy, to take a sabbath rest, to spend time in centring. I succeeded at none of that. My head raced, I answered emails, I worked on worship, I did a lot of what I had to do because I had to do it. I then mixed that in with self frustration and doubt because I “the holy proclaimer of the importance of being unhurried and resting in God couldn’t do it.” So there is my confession. On the other hand I got some things done I had to do and I had some conversations I had to have and then the next day when it turned out our presenter had to leave early because her scheduled flight had been grounded and if she wanted to get home she had to go 2 hours earlier I finally was able to stop. I walked over to the labyrinth and for the first time since I don’t know when I walked it slow and steady asking for holy calm, silencing myself so that I could become in tune with my soul, my spirit and my God. It took longer than usual to get my mind to stop the rat race but when it finally did I could actually just listen and discover I was not alone. Suddenly I discovered I was surrounded by birds singing, praising, praying along with me. By the end I felt less guilty for taking time to myself and time with God a whole lot more whole and ready to go forward into my week. I felt in tune.

Taking breaks like this is enormously helpful, but we all need this “harpooner” time more than once or twice a year. That’s why God commands us to take a Sabbath day *each week*. It’s also why God commands us to spend time listening for the Spirit’s voice *each day* in prayer and meditation. I think it’s also why we were created in such a way that we must spend a third of our lives sleeping.

Spending time in rest is vital, not just when we’ve been working hard but also when we are agitated about looming catastrophes, whether personal or global. Our instinct in times of crisis is often to get busy and grasp hold of every scrap of security we can. The story of Mary and Martha suggests a different approach: that instead of running about “worried and distracted by many things,” we stop, *breathe*, look around, and listen carefully—listening to each other as children of God, and to God’s Earth.

Most of all, we are called to restore our connection to an unhurried God. We are called to “sit at the feet of Jesus”—which for us is the Spirit of the Living Christ (Holy Spirit). We sit quietly, listening for the direction of the Spirit, refusing to stand up and act until we’ve heard what we are being called to do. Then, because the Jesus who blesses Mary most certainly does *not* think we should only ever sit idly at his feet but get up and follow him, we are called to act once we have received direction. We are to take up our oars and row on a daily basis, just as we are called

daily to set them down long enough to reconnect with the Spirit and follow our best and surest Source of Hope.¹

¹ sermon adapted from Busy: Restoring Connection to an Unhurried God Part 2: The Hope of God by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.