



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Distracted Life
A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

August 8, 2010
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

Luke 10:38-42

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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."

This is the Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God!

My daughter caught me red-handed last week. There was nothing I could do; no way to deny what I had done. She called a spade a spade and I could not talk my way out of it.

We were with another family from Massanutten last Sunday afternoon, Brigid, Mairead, Patrick and I; just chatting about this and that. Then Brigid started to tell me something; she was speaking right to me, describing an experience she'd had. As she was talking I remembered something that I wanted to ask a member of this other family. And so, when Brigid was finished – having waited politely – I asked my question, starting a new conversation. When there was a lull, Brigid looked right at me and said, *'you weren't even listening when I was talking to you; you were just waiting until I finished so you could talk to her.'*

Ouch. Brigid was right; she was telling me a story, and while I should have been listening fully to her, I became distracted by my question, which could easily have waited.

I'd like to say that this experience is an isolated moment in our relationship, but I know myself too well. There are many occasions in which I am distracted by what's coming next or what happened earlier or the things I need to do, so that I am not fully present in the moment with Brigid – but also in other areas of my life. It's a terrible confession – one I'm not proud of – but one which I suspect may haunt others here today as well.

Distractions are a challenge. They threaten to pull us away from the very thing that we claim is important. This story of Martha and Mary is a bit disturbing because we can be doing all the right things – the things that are revered and time-honored– and still miss the mark; still be distracted from what matters most.

This story is familiar to many: one sister is in the kitchen, while the other one is listening to Jesus. Martha rightly, offers hospitality, while Mary plops herself down in front of Jesus. A woman, sitting at the feet of a man, taking on the role of a disciple: this is a scandalous position, at the least! And yet Jesus receives them both; it's only when they disagree that he takes sides:

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Martha's intentions were honorable. As we've seen before, hospitality is good – even required in the culture. But she got distracted, sidetracked by her *desire to get things done*. She had started out on the right track, showing the hospitality due an honored guest, but in her hurry, she forgot why she was doing it; she forgot what really mattered: showing honor and kindness to her guest. Her busy-ness became an obstacle to her attention.

Jesus describes Martha's ways as 'distracted;' this beckons me – and I hope you – to look more closely at what that means in our world today; a world which is busy, and multi-tasking, and chaotic.

The meaning of the word Jesus chooses is, literally – *to be pulled from all directions*. This is an apt description of Martha – who was clearly trying to honor her guest, but found her efforts frustrated by tasks. I can sympathize with Martha; I can feel her frustration in this situation: Jesus is there in her home, and she longs to spend time with

him. However her world – *her culture*- dictate the ways in which she can and cannot do this. Martha is pulled toward the traditional ways of women, pulled away from the place of a disciple, taunted by her view of a sister who finds the courage to sit at Jesus’ feet – despite what people might say – and plagued by frustration and anger with Mary’s choice.

Martha is literally pulled from all directions when Jesus enters her home. And then, to make matters worse, Martha sabotaged her own good intentions, when she asked Jesus to referee her frustration with Mary. Her efforts at hospitality gave way to a severe *breech* of hospitality when she put her guest in a most awkward place.

Gently, Jesus points out Martha’s mistake, not by rejecting the *work*, but by rejecting the *perspective*: that the work mattered more than the opportunity his visit presented; that holding fast to tradition was more important than seizing a moment of intimacy with Jesus. Jesus knew that even the best meals, prepared by the most gracious hosts are eaten & forgotten, while the lessons of the Gospel - moments of grace received at the feet of the Lord - are eternal, transforming the lives of men & women in all times.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a ‘what happened next’ paragraph in this narrative? Did Martha receive Jesus’ words with joy and relief? Did she look at him with amazement and cry out,

*‘You mean – this is ok, what Mary’s doing?
And I can sit with you as well?’*

Or did she throw up her hands in frustration, feeling rejected and put down; distracted even further by Jesus’ words? Did she cry out,

*‘What do you mean, Jesus? I’ve done what I’m supposed to do,
and now you tell me that Mary has made the ‘right choice?’*

I would love to know how Martha responded – but that’s not what really matters for us today. What matters for us is how we respond when faced with similar choices.

Luke is the Gospel author that sends us out in search of the least, the lost and the lonely. Luke’s description of Jesus’ ministry keeps us focused on service: on doing what we can to lift up the presence of Christ through our actions.

The passage that comes just before this one is the story of the *Good Samaritan*. The Samaritan is lifted up precisely because he ‘did something’ – he cared for a stranger who would consider him an enemy. He stopped to provide aide and then kept caring, while others, attentive to the customs of their faith, passed by at a distance.

Martha is not the ‘bad guy’ in today’s text because of her actions. Rather, Martha’s distractions got the best of her, pulling her away from the opportunity to grow deeper in her relationship to Jesus.

Our culture promotes the same kind of busy-ness. We are *expected* to be busy, even overworked; we assume that anyone who is anyone must be busy all the time. It’s almost a status symbol: if we’re busy, we must be important; if we’re not, we’re probably shirking our responsibility. But *activity* can easily become an excuse for not dealing with the things that matter. Our *busyness* can keep us from being fully present. Our busyness can *distract* us.

And we are easy prey to these distractions. There is so much to do in our days; so many places in which distractions lead us away from the deep and abiding presence of Je-

sus - the very thing that gives us life.

Last week was one of those weeks when there were a lot of things on my to-do list. Some of them were things for Massanutten; some were for my family; and there were other things as well. It was a doable list – when the week started.

Naturally, things changed. And so did my pace as I moved through the week. I was probably a lot like Martha: pulled from many directions. And yet, by the grace of God, there were moments when I found myself at the feet of Jesus, waiting, listening and watching. One of those moments was on Thursday afternoon. I stopped by to see a man whose family was gathered around him, surrounding him with their love and support during the last days of his life. I stopped in to briefly say hello, and see how they were doing. I sat down and stayed because, I saw that this moment was different than the tasks on that list; the details of that list melted away as I sat with them and listened while they talked about the man who was a husband, brother and father to them. They shared stories of their lives and asked after other family members. Together we sat at the feet of Jesus waiting, listening and watching.

These moments happen in our lives – often because something requires us to change our speed, to slow down, to redirect our focus and our energies. But Jesus' message to us today is not simply to take advantage of those opportunities when they come along – but to move away from a frenzied, distracted existence and toward one that seeks out such moments.

There are many ways we can do this as people of faith; many ways to build into our lives 'sitting at the feet of Jesus' time. One of the obvious ways is what we're doing right now, as we gather for worship. We come to be in community with people who share our faith, our hope, the promises of Christ. We come expecting to hear the word of the Lord lifted up, taught and shared – through the sermon, but also through our singing, praying, listening and being together. We look to receive this word in the sacraments, as we gather at the table this morning, or around the font, as we did just a few weeks ago.

But we also do this when we build into our days opportunities to gather with others, in small groups and Bible Studies, Sunday School classes or prayer groups, even gathering with friends, regularly and often to give thanks for the gift of those very friendships. This time away from the busyness of the week affords us space to sit and listen at the feet of Jesus; to step out of the distracted existence that is the pace of our world right now.

We need to see these opportunities as very real choices. We can't, like Martha, talk ourselves out of the very thing our souls long for because there is too much to 'do.' We can't allow our cultural code of worthiness dictate what is of deep and lasting value. We have to hear Jesus' words to Martha, as words to us as well: it's ok to move away from the distracted life, and drink in the ministry of Jesus' grace; it's ok to enjoy the life Jesus offers in an intentional and meaningful way.

Let us pray,

*O God, enter into the chaos that often defines our lives.
Give us the space and inclination to dwell deeply in your ways.
Through Christ, Amen*