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July 21, 2013  
The Congregational Church UCC, Iowa City  
Luke 10: 38-42  
(Transcription—sermon delivered without text)

**Luke 10:38–42 (NRSV)**

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."

**Bothered and Bewildered in Bethany**

Today's scripture lesson is a little bothersome to me, and a little bewildering to me, as it was, I think, to Martha. At first blush, there is a subtle wrongness to it. We understand some of the rightness of what is happening here, but Martha is in fact tasked with entertaining guests in her home. And here she has who she considers to be the most important guest of all, Jesus of Nazareth, and so she wants to lay out a good celebration for him, a good meal for him, and one that takes some work. And so, in order to show him how much she loves him, in order to be remembered by other people as someone who loved Jesus, she produces a meal for him. And herself is bothered when her younger sister is sitting at Jesus's feet while she is in the kitchen, doing all the cooking and the cleaning. It is understandable for us that Martha would be a little upset at this. How many of us have been locked in the kitchen when we would have rather been entertaining our guests in the main room? I know, for my part, whenever it was that we had to cook something at 500 degrees in our tiny kitchen or prepare meat to exactly the right temperature, I was the one doing it, sweating in the kitchen while other people were having fun outside. It leads to a little resentment.

I of course would never go to my guests and say, "uh, I need some help in the kitchen here," there were too many social conventions against doing that. Martha appears to have the overwhelming convention of being the older sister, and coming out and saying, "Mary, Mary, ah, what are you doing?"

So how confused must Martha have been when Jesus rebukes not Mary, but her? It was a little confusing to me. Do we not value the workers in our lives? But of course Jesus's point is this: I am here to teach you. Mary is learning from me, I would like to teach you, too. I did not come here to sit alone in the main room. So Martha, really, we could have had a one-course meal. We could have had a potluck; brought some potato salad. Then we all could have enjoyed each other's company together. Really. You allowed yourself to be distracted by unnecessary things,

by the glory that comes with welcoming me in this high fashion to which I am not accustomed and am not terribly fond of.

So this is what Jesus is saying: Mary has focused on what we are doing here, and where we are going, and how we get there from where we are now. Mary is focused on the journey. And I think this message resonates a little bit with us. It may have been a little amusing to you to see a quote from a comic strip you probably don't read opening the bulletin. But I think that gets at part of our own lives. How many of you have lost sleep to an endless trawl on the internet? How many of you sat there with other things to do and discovered, as I have, that really there is an incredible wealth of information about Game of Thrones, a Song of Ice and Fire on the internet and you don't even need to read the books, if you just go down the different wiki links. Really. It's amazing. And then it's 3am.

And I have to ask myself, "where am I going? And how is this helping me to get there?"

One of my favorite scenes in *The West Wing* was in the seventh season, a season I did not watch until about two years ago. In it, there is this great moment where Leo McGarry, played by the late great character actor John Spencer, this weathered man always there when you needed someone with wry humor, formerly chief of staff of the White House, comes back as a consultant. And he spends two days trying to get senior staff to listen to him, but they have press conferences to do. They have meetings with reporters. They have calls from the military they must answer, they have all of those things that pile up in our day-to-day lives. He finally gets them together and he has an easel with a pad of paper and on it is written a date, I think it is 100 days, which he then crosses off and writes 99. This is how many days left we have to govern. You are all running in place, you all joined this White House to make a difference, we have 99 days. How are we going to do it?

And this is Jesus's message for Martha. We don't have that much time left. What are we doing? Are you listening to me, are you following me? Are you trying to accomplish your goals? Or are you beset by the worries that you might not be good enough? That I might not love you because the meal was not elaborate enough? What are your worries? Really, focus. It does not matter if your cloak is out of place. It does not matter if we have the clay plates. It does not matter if we just have bread and hummus and olives. It does not matter. Do not be distracted by these things that mean, nothing, in the end.

And this is the reading of all the commenters on this passage. All of them say that the fault here with Martha is that the meal was too elaborate, and I looked at that, and I was a little bit bothered, too. Because it is easy for us to say these things are unnecessary—the worries of the world: are we good enough? Have we prepared food enough? It's easy for us to say these are immaterial. But look at how we have treated people who prepared our food throughout time and history. Look at how we have treated the work that people do, cleaning the house throughout history. It is always the way it is pictured in this passage, there is the elevated life of the mind, and then behind the scenes, everything else just magically happens. Because, usually, there is a woman there to do it.

There have been studies done showing that when it comes to housework, women are afraid of being judged by their guests, and so they work and work and work. In the aggregate, men, it turns out, don't care. I remember in the fraternity house, we had a female friend of ours come over to our third-floor bathroom, which had two sinks, one of which was unused and piled with bottles of shampoo or something, and she just walked in and said "this bathroom? This is the difference between women and men."

Because all this work that Martha has done has been treated throughout time and history as the unnecessary work. As the unfocused work. Because we elevate the life of the mind, but we still need to eat. And we still expect food and a clean house. And so the bothersome part of this is that we don't address that need here, especially in this day and age when so many people who prepare the food that we eat in restaurants are scraping by. They have real distractions and worries that are not simply there extraneously. It is the question, "how am I going to feed myself after feeding others?" Especially with all the technological innovations we have now that allow for Just-in-Time scheduling. "I don't know how many hours I'm going to work this week. I don't know when the hours are going to be. My hours may be cancelled at the last second, I may be reassigned hours on no notice, which means I can't work another job, which means I can't count on being at the Bible study, which means I can't count on my shift at the soup kitchen. I cannot focus. Not because I have built the expectations upon myself, but because I need to eat.

And this is the other part of this story. Martha's needs to entertain Jesus in an elevated fashion, as it seems has happened, did not arise from nowhere. She felt the pressure of society to be a good hostess. She felt the pressure to show her love for other people in these prepared ways. She felt the pressure of doing all this work because no one was helping her. And so while we work on focusing our attention on our goals, on becoming closer to God, through love of God and love of neighbor, we must also remember our obligation to help other people achieve those goals, too. The distractions don't come out of the blue. We create them every day of our lives when we expect the food to just appear and the house to just clean itself, and we make comments when it doesn't happen. So let us remember that for all of us who want to focus on our lives as Jesus has told us, giving us that gift that will not disappear in the end, we have neighbors that struggle, too, and we can help. So let us be like Jesus, not judging, but helping people get to the place where they can be free from distraction. Amen.