

Distractions
Luke 10:38-42
July 18, 2010—Covenant Presbyterian
The Rev. Catherine Robinson

So, here's the big question
that people usually ask
about this story:

*Are you a Mary
or a Martha?*

It's sort of like the churchy way
of asking,

"Hey Baby,
what's your sign?"

And there's another big question about the story:

How do you feel
about the *ending*?

A lot of us may respond
to the ending

like Jane Carol Redmont does.

She says,

"If everyone

went into the kitchen –

including Jesus –

we'd all have more time

for contemplation and study.

And the dishes would

get done, too."

("The Mary-Martha Double-Bind," Lectionary Reflections for Pentecost 7
(C) <http://www.thewitness.org/agw/redmont071504.html>)

Yeah!

Let's get those dishes done!

Can I get an "Amen, Sister!"

But this week,

in an online discussion,

Katie Cashwell

(a seminary student

whom many of us got to

know, love, and respect

on our first trip to New Orleans),

pointed out what may be an incorrect
assumption

that many of us have

about this story.

We always assume
that Martha is doing
domestic chores.

But the story doesn't say
that Martha's last name
is Stewart.

Listen to Katie
(those of you who know her
will love this!):

"There is NO mention of
a kitchen,
meal preparation,
or domestic chores!!!

Let's get Martha
out of the kitchen
and not just put her there
because she is a woman.

As my New Testament professor says,
the traditional,
and incorrect read on this story
is that Mary has her buns
on the floor,
while Martha
has her biscuits
in the oven!"

I'm so proud of Katie.

She's right, and her New Testament prof. is, too.

Feminist that I am,

I had always had

Martha's biscuits in the oven
and Mary's buns on the floor.

Maybe it's because
I like to cook.

Maybe it's because
I was making assumptions
about the life of a
1st century Palestinian woman.

Maybe it's because I (very mistakenly) associate
cooking and cleaning
with the ministry of hospitality.

And maybe it's because
in my generation
the big liberation
was that Mary got to sit

at Jesus' feet
and listen to his words.

It doesn't matter why.

And really,

it doesn't matter exactly what

Martha was doing.

The text says that Martha was

"distracted and anxious (or worried)

with much serving."

The word that gets translated

as "serving,"

is a word that refers

to various kinds of leadership

and service

in the New Testament.

According to one scholar,

this word, *diakonia*,

"involves the listening,

the proclamation

and the living

of the gospel."

(Nancy Cardoso Pereira, quoted in Cláudio Carvalhaes,
"Preaching the Lesson," *Lectionary Homiletics*, 7/18/2010,
<http://www.goodpreacher.com/journalread.php?id=1610...>)

Some believe that Martha

was the leader of the religious community

that met in Mary and Martha's house.

Really, I don't think it matters

what Martha was doing.

Whether she was doing

the 1st century equivalent

of catching up on emails,

and preparing for meetings,

or whether she was stirring the soup

and mopping the floor,

she was distracted and anxious because of it.

For that matter,

we don't know what Mary was thinking

as she sat there

at the feet of Jesus.

She may have wanted to get up and help Martha,

but felt inadequate and stupid

in the Martha task department,

so she was sitting there quietly

worrying about her inadequacy!

One of the best conversations
I ever had about this story
was with a group of elementary school children
at Vacation Bible School.

I commented that Martha was distracted,
and I asked them
if they ever got distracted.
Oh my goodness,
it was as if I had
opened the floodgates!

Every child in the class
had at least one story to tell me
about being distracted.
We talked about the television being a distraction
when it's time to go to bed,
and thoughts being a distraction
when it's time to go to sleep.
Little brothers or sisters
can be a distraction
when we are trying to pay attention
to our friends.

Life is just full of distractions!

I asked the children
if they thought that kids
are the only people
who get distracted.
Do adults ever get distracted? I asked.
You should have seen
the knowing looks
on their faces!

They knew!
They knew very well!

Martha's problem is that
she's gotten so focused on her work
that she can't pay attention
to anyone or anything else—
especially to God.

I've tried to imagine
what would have happened if Martha
had actually tried to sit down
and listen to Jesus.

I don't think
she would have been able
to hear a word

he said.
 I think she would have been too worried
 about the roast in the oven,
 or about the report
 that she had to write later that day,
 or about all of her unanswered email.
 And while Jesus was talking,
 she might have gotten a text message,
 and she would have needed
 to answer that right away.
 Martha was distracted
by her work.
 And who knows
 what would have happened
 if Mary and/or Jesus
 had tried to help.
 Martha might have just
 thrown up her hands and said,
 "Oh, sit down!
 It's easier to do it myself!"

Many of us are like Martha.
 In fact, I think
 most of us are, sometimes.
 We have
 so many things to think about,
 so many things to do,
 so many priorities in our life.

And some of us
 need so much to be needed
 that saying yes
 is not so much a choice
 as it is a compulsion.

So we ride off
 in all directions.
 And then, before long,
 we begin to feel
 distracted and worried,
 unable to focus on anything much,
 blaming everybody else for our problems,
 and *why doesn't somebody else
 help out around here!*

Jesus says,
 "There is need of only *one thing.*"

One thing!
 In our Presbyterian tradition,
 we say that this one thing is
 "to glorify God
 and to enjoy God forever."
 That is our "chief end,"
 according to
 the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Can you imagine a day
 with *only one thing*
 on the to-do list?
 Glorify and enjoy God.
 That's it!

That's the priority!

This week I read a story
 about Martin Luther.

Luther,
 as you can imagine,
 was a very busy man.
 Pastor,
 university professor,
 author of dozens of books
 and hundreds of pamphlets
 (perhaps that would be like
 writing a blog these days?).

He was also a husband and father of six,
 and, incidentally,
 the leader of
 the budding Protestant movement.

Luther also spent
 a full hour in prayer
 every day.
 First thing in the morning,
 that was what he did.

One day his assistant,
 Phillip Melancthon,
 burst in to the room
 where Luther was praying
 and said that it was
 time for him to quit praying.

The schedule was just too full that day.
 Luther had too many other things to do.

No time to pray.
 Do you know what Luther said?
 He said
 that if he was really that beset
 by problems,
 maybe he had better spend not one hour
 but two in prayer.

(As told in Alex Gondola, "Distracted by Much Serving," a
 sermon on Luke 10:38-42, published in *Lectionary Homiletics*
<http://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=11496>)

When I get in my Martha/Melanchthon
 frame of mind (maybe you're like this, too, sometimes)
 I actually begin to resent
 taking time away
 to pray,
 to read Scripture,
 to do nothing but waste time
 in the presence of God.
 There's too much to do!

But the testimony of Luther
 and the word of God
 for us today
 is that energy for serving
 comes from time spent
 sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Please don't misunderstand.
 Sitting at the feet of Jesus
 doesn't necessarily require
 the particular posture of sitting.

It may involve running,
 or walking,
 or painting,
 or playing a musical instrument.

It may be a discussion with a friend
 who walks with you
 on your spiritual journey.

But, it always involves attention
 to Scripture,
 which testifies to Jesus,
 the Word of God.

Well, this is the end of the sermon....
 but it's not the end of the sermon, either.
 The sermon continues
 with the hymn that we sing,
 and with the rest of worship,

all reminders that "one thing is necessary."
Thanks be to God.
Amen.