

Sunday, July 17, 2016  
Luke 10:38-42

Lois Harder

### **Of Activists and Academics**

It's been another crazy, difficult week hasn't it? It seems that violence continues to win the day with one report after another of deadly outbursts close to home and around the world. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison. Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. Those words, among others, are our prayers in these days. But those are words. Just words. Words are cheap and easy. What *actions* are called for at such a time as this? Taking to the streets with chants and signs? Writing letters and making phone calls to our legislators? Forming coalitions and joining activist groups? Yes! "The struggle between word and deed, the speaker and the doer, the contemplative and the activist, will no doubt be with us until the end of time; and the complaint of the one about the other will undoubtedly recur in the future as frequently as it has in the past." (Feasting on the Word, Douglas John Hall) President Obama recognizes the significance of both words and deeds. On Wednesday this past week as he, again, struggled to respond to gun violence, this time in Dallas, he "met with police officers and mayors, academics and civil rights activists". (The Detroit News, July 13)

The story of Mary and Martha (the academic and the activist, if you will) is placed strategically by Dr. Luke immediately after the story of The Good Samaritan, which we heard last Sunday. That story ends with the command, "Go and DO". Now we have Mary and Martha which seems to communicate just the opposite message; "Sit and listen." So how do we know what is "the better part", the most needed, the one thing that will not be taken away? This is a story about Jesus, so as usual, it's a story that can be understood in more than one way!

As I read and studied this week I confess to you that I was looking for a different angle on this story. I did not want to read, again, about the traditional "Martha, Martha" response of Jesus which I tend to hear as condescending and critical of Martha for being who she was! So I searched and read carefully for scholars and preachers who were making a different point with the story. Why? Partly because I AM Martha! I am a do-er! It's hard for me to sit still through an entire movie or listen attentively to a full radio segment. I'm no good at disciplined prayer practice on my own, which is why it's so important for me to do centering prayer regularly with a group of people. When I read this story I hear, "Lois, Lois, you are worried and distracted by many things." And, as with all critique, it's hard to hear – because it's true! But come on – I know many of you must hear your own name in this story too, right? (name some names... women and men) *Most* of us are worried and distracted by many things! We live in a 24/7 culture that demands that we consume lots of caffeine, listen nearly constantly to lots of (mostly) very bad news, respond immediately to what's going on around us and coming at us (which often means responding without opportunity for much thought). We go out for dinner and each of us has our nose in our own hand-held device. To be successful we're supposed to multi-task frenetically, get up early and stay up late. Many of us spend more time at work than we do nurturing the most important and significant relationships in our lives. Yes, we are worried and distracted by many things.

Where is the line between *carpe diem* (seize the day!) and sitting at Jesus' feet, listening. Let's look at the story again.

“Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.” Martha. A woman. In first century Palestine owned a home. This is the first clue we get that Martha was a go-getter. Not a lot of first-century Palestinian women owned a home. There were a few, but not a lot. Furthermore, we learn that she welcomed Jesus into her home. This doesn’t mean she just casually opened the door when Jesus knocked and off-handedly said, “Hey, Jesus! Come on it!” Hospitality was (and still is) a big, BIG deal in Middle Eastern culture. “Welcoming him into her home” meant that she had worked very hard to prepare her home, prepare a wonderful, lovely meal (recall the beautiful Iftar meal that some of us were treated to by our Turkish friends a couple weeks ago). Martha had invested herself fully with the time, energy and work required to properly welcome Jesus. The first thing we read about Mary was that she sat at the Lord’s feet. Right away we begin to see and feel the dynamic. Raise your hand if you’re the oldest child. You know where this is going, right? I have worked my tail off for this and now my spoiled younger sibling (because if you’re the oldest the younger ones are always spoiled!) comes waltzing in and just sits down!

But let’s read on... “Martha was ‘distracted’ by her many tasks.” This word can also be translated as anxious or preoccupied. Well, of course she was! She had a lot going on! But then we come to the really interesting part of the story. Rather than just going to her sister and telling her directly what her concern is, Martha does the classic family system divisive move. She triangles Jesus right into this conflict. “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.” “As a matter of fact, Jesus did not care.” (Feasting on the Word, James A. Wallace) Martha had lost her focus and her perspective. She had become bitter and angry in all of her preparations. She really *wanted* to be hospitable and use her amazing gifts of hospitality. Because doing and preparing and cooking and providing and juggling all the balls and being busy – that is who Martha WAS! Those were her gifts! But “in her frantic rush, in her distraction by much serving, Martha was showing neither love to Jesus nor love to herself.” (Rev. Dr. Amy E. Richter, *This One Thing* <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2013/06/26/9-pentecost-proper-11-c-2013>) Mary’s gifts, on the other hand, were of listening, attending, being contemplative and quiet. So the problem was NOT that Martha was a do-er and Mary was a be-er. Jesus didn’t tell Martha not to use her gifts; he simply reeled her back in so that she could re-focus her energy and remember why she had gone to all that work in the first place. Oh, yeah. It was because she loved Jesus and she wanted to be hospitable and welcoming. Oh, yeah.

Attentiveness. That’s what Jesus was calling for. Mindfulness. Funny, isn’t it? How these notions circle around and come in and out of our vernacular over the centuries. The word and concept of ‘mindfulness’ is all the rage these days; it’s in book titles and TED talks. It’s what therapists and yoga instructors are teaching. It’s what doctors and life coaches recommend. Jesus wanted both Martha AND Mary to be attentive. Mindful. He wanted them NOT to be distracted, anxious, preoccupied or unfocused. For this is when we lose our way and forget what is the better part. Be mindful so that you can fully embrace your God-given gifts and be who you’ve been created to be. Be mindful so that you can choose the better part, that which is most needed. When we’re not mindful we give ourselves over to what one writer called “the sin of disregard...And disregard, as we heard in last week’s story leads to complacency and compliance. When we’re not mindful, not only do we risk becoming anxious and sometimes cranky, we also become immune to that which should cause outrage. We give in to saying,

‘well, that’s (just) the way it is’ and we accept that the world around us is the world we should accept.” (*No Comparison* by Karoline Lewis at <http://workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4686>)

What are your God-given gifts that Jesus is calling you to focus on and be mindful of? The church, indeed, the world needs the gifts of the academics and the activists, the Marys and the Marthas. I don’t think this story is necessarily about which one is better; it’s about understanding that each one is important. It’s about honoring our own and one another’s strengths and struggles as we seek to stay focused on the life and teachings of Jesus – the better part, the most needed, the one thing that will not be taken away from us.

I’d like to close with some brief encouragements to be mindful.

The first is this beautiful painting that was given to me and hangs in my office – I hope you’ve been gazing at it already. Take a moment to look at it.

The next is a quote from the Dalai Lama: “This we can all bear witness to, living as we do plagued by unremitting anxiety. It becomes more and more imperative that the life of the spirit be avowed as the only firm basis upon which to establish happiness and peace.” (pause)

George Eliot said: “If we had a keen vision of all that is ordinary in human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow or the squirrel’s heartbeat, and we should die of the roar which is the other side of silence.” (pause)

This is what Thomas Merton said: “To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is itself to succumb to the violence of our times.” (pause)

(<http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/proper11c.html>)

And finally, Jesus of Nazareth: “... you are distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” (pause)

Let’s stand and join in the words of response: