

“Worried and Distracted”

Sermon by Pr. Renata Eustis

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Luke 10: 38-42

The story of Mary and Martha and Jesus’s visit is one that usually stirs up some feelings. On the one hand, it’s notable that this is a story where women share center stage with Jesus. But on the other hand, it seems like they’re pitted against each other—Mary got it right and Martha got it wrong. I’ve found that more people—both male and female—identify with Martha, so this is a story that leaves us feeling judged by Jesus and coming up short.

That’s how we hear this story in our time.

Let’s step back for a minute and look at how the first hearers might have heard it. For the people of Jesus’s time, this story of Mary and Martha is every bit as jarring as the story we heard last week of the Good Samaritan.

The first thing that’s out of the ordinary is that *Martha* is the owner of the house. It was highly unusual for women to be the head of the household—even if they were unmarried or widows. They usually lived in the house of another male relative. But this house where Jesus goes to visit is a female-headed household. And, it’s not just Jesus—he’s got his whole entourage of disciples—who are no doubt giving each other looks that say, “What is going on?”—because going into a woman’s house was also not a normal thing to do.

But the story gets even stranger when Mary joins the men in sitting at Jesus’s feet. She’s there listening to and learning from the rabbi—something that men do. Martha is 100% within the expectations of their culture to think Mary should be doing the women’s work with her. And, it would be jarring to everyone there to hear Jesus’s response.

The learning that I want to lift out of the story to bring into our own time is that Jesus challenges the rules of society that conflict with the Kingdom of God—the Reign of God. The rules that Jesus is challenging now are different than the ones of his own time—but he challenges us none the less—and through that challenge, feeds us as well.

We are in the midst of a series on money and our spirits, and this story has something to contribute to our reflection. Martha is a woman of means. She has a big enough house to welcome Jesus and all of these disciples and she has the money for food to feed them. She is not someone who is living on the edge. When Jesus sent out

his disciples, two by two, without any food or money—he was counting on people like Martha who could and would support his ministry.

This is a story that highlights the power of money. Money can give you freedom—it can also do the opposite. But in this story we see the freedom money can bring. We don't know how Martha has her money but the freedom it brings to her is independence. Instead of living in the household of a male relative, she can have her own place—and she can call the shots. And, because she chooses to use her money to support Jesus and his ministry, she gives him the freedom to focus on that ministry—to do that ministry without doing side jobs—and to do it in places he might not otherwise be able to.

In a more general way, money is something that makes hospitality possible. Hospitality was a primary value in Jesus's time. It was expected that you would receive any travelers that came to your door—in need of food or a place to stay—whether or not you knew them. We don't live in a time or place where there are those kind of expectations for offering hospitality. I have not traveled the whole world, but every place I have been has had a stronger culture of hospitality than we have here in the U.S. We are very protective of our private space.

I, personally, feel challenged by the hospitality in this story—and by Martha's actions in particular.

I've also been thinking about hospitality in light of the extreme heat we have been living with.

I'm on our neighborhood listserv and I saw the heading of a post that said “Keeping an eye on the homeless in our neighborhood.” It started out talking about homeless people who are camped out in bus shelters and on church steps. And I was bracing myself for the complaints because I've gotten them before. But this post wasn't what I expected. It said how—given the dangerously high temperatures—we should all be checking on people who are outside—leaving jugs of water out and getting help for people who are overheated.

It's like the extreme heat has brought these neighbors without homes into a different kind of light. The intensity of this heat calls us to see things differently.

That's what I believe is the gist of what Jesus is saying to Martha. When he says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing,” he could be talking to us. Renata, Renata. . . Kevin, Kevin, . . . Joanne, Joanne. . . you are worried and distracted by many things.

What if we heard this as an expression of care rather than condemnation? Jesus sees our anxiety just like he saw Martha's. Maybe the issue isn't Martha's activity but the anxiety behind it. And Jesus calls us to stop spinning in our anxious activity and learn from him. Sit in his presence and listen to his word. Let that presence and that word refocus you the same way this extreme heat has refocused us.

Anxiety—the way I see it—is always related to trying to control something that is outside of your control. But somehow you think you can control it—if you just work harder or try something else. Surrender—acceptance—are what is needed but they seem so out of reach.

In the midst of this anxiety, Jesus calls us to sit with him—and listen to his word about what God is doing in you and in this world. It really doesn't all depend on you. The only real antidote for anxiety is trust—and for me, the only way I can get to trust is by being in the presence of someone I trust—be that Jesus or someone who is embodying Jesus—being Jesus for me.

Being in the presence of Jesus—by sitting down with his word—is like sitting down in this extreme heat. It is clear that it is not in our control to lower the outside temperature. Even for those who see the connection to climate change—and realize that there are things we can do as individuals and as citizens—we still see how much of it is out of our control—and that makes us anxious. But we all reach a point of exhaustion—like the way the heat zaps the energy out of even the most type A person. In these moments, Jesus offers us the gift of sitting in his presence—of learning from him—of learning that we can trust him.

On Friday, I got a text from my husband, Paul, that said how there were immigration raids happening in Hyattsville. The daughter of one of his co-workers called her mother frantically saying they were going door-to-door in their apartment building and taking people away. I felt sick and powerless.

About an hour later, I was visiting with someone in the congregation who told me she only looks at the news once a day because it is so distracting. This is a compassionate person who truly cares about the world around her. But the reality of this time we are living in is that we are being bombarded by heartsickening things that are happening every day. Like Martha, we are worried and distracted by many things—not just in our own lives but in the life of the world around us.

Today, Jesus is calling out to each of us—in care rather than judgment—“George, George. . . Kendall, Kendall. . . there is need of only one thing.” Sit with me long enough to get some relief from your anxiety. Sit with me often enough to know you can trust me.

May we each hear these caring words spoken to us. Today.

Amen.