

<sup>38</sup> Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup> 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." <sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup> there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The Word of God for the People of God.

**thanks be to God.**

Poor Martha. She really gets a bad rap. Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. Poor Martha plays the role of "what not to do when Jesus is around." Her one shining moment in Luke's gospel, and she blows it, getting so flustered that she asks Jesus himself to correct her sister.

This is, indeed, the only time Martha appears in the gospel of Luke, but in John she is present when Jesus shows up at her house, and she is even more candid with Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother Lazarus would not have died." And yet, John the gospel writer is clear when he puts her at the head of the list, saying, "Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and her brother Lazarus."

But Martha is having a rough day here. She has invited Jesus into her home, and she's having trouble keeping up with the hospitality. Her sister is absorbed with their guest, and Martha, well Martha's just absorbed with the work. And so she interrupts--Lord, don't you care that she's not doing what she's supposed to do? I can just see her with a frustrated finger jabbing in the direction of Mary. Martha is serving--she's giving it all she's got to make sure this whole event goes off without a hitch. And yet she's the one who gets the bad rap, not Mary. But Jesus points her back to herself. Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.

So why talk about Martha on a day when we are lifting up the practice of service, of serving others, as a key practice of the Christian faith? Why talk about Martha's serving, when Jesus lifts up Mary's devoted listening instead?

Jesus does not take issue with Martha's service. The problem he names is not that she's working to serve him and the other guests; the problem he names is that she is worried and distracted. The greek word for distracted there

is *periespato*. It means something more than distracted--it actually has a physical quality to it; it means to be pulled or dragged around in different directions, to the periphery, or the outside edges, like the perimeter--to be dragged away from the center. Ah. We know that feeling.

We can relate. Martha is absorbed in everything but Jesus; she's pulled in the direction of 8,000 things on her list, and she's distracted by her sister's seeming laziness. She's so frazzled that she even accuses Jesus of not caring about her--Lord, do you not care? Martha is lost in herself, wandering frantically in the maze of worries that, in the end, has its center in self-interest. Service, at its heart, is centered in someone else's interest.

Service in the way of Jesus is to make oneself available to others, to get outside of our own lives and into someone else's life, offering a bit of me to you, for your use, to make your life better, fuller, easier. Think of Jesus on his way to heal Jairus' daughter. He was focused on Jairus, on where he was going, but he was available enough that when the woman touched the fringe of his clothes, he stopped, and he served her, too. He wasn't just on a mission for Jairus; he was available to serve whoever came in his path. Many of us have stories of times when I've been wallowing in my own issues, worried and distracted by many things, but then I'm given the gift of getting outside of myself, becoming absorbed with someone else, their life, their needs. Even if it's for a moment, or for a day of service, or for a week of mission trip, for that time, it's less of me, and more of others.

The truth is, many of us are serving, day in and day out. But Martha shows us that it's possible to lose our center even in the midst of serving. It's pretty easy, in fact, to lose our focus on Christ and on others in all of the ways that we serve from day to day. So how can I move from having that focus for a moment, or a day, or a week, to having that focus day-in and day-out? How can I move from the distracted, self-absorbed life, where I do things because it's my job or because it feeds me and my sense of worth--to a life that is daily, moment-by-moment, centered on Christ, and available to others? How can I move to a servant's way of life?

One way we begin, I think, is by learning the humility that grows with hidden service. By our nature, we do not like humility; we rather prefer glory. Nathan Foster says, "The flesh whines against service, but it screams against hidden service."

His father, Richard Foster, wrote the classic book on Spiritual Disciplines, called *A Celebration of Discipline*, and he echoes the thought; he says, "True service rests content in hiddenness. It does not fear the lights and glare of attention, but it does not seek them either."

Well, I'm going to turn on the lights for a moment. Actually, this room is full of hidden servants. Before you arrived this morning--before I arrived this morning--someone else was here. Hermil Bobb was here early, cleaning the cafe and making the first pot of coffee, sweeping off the walkway outside, checking the restrooms, so that when you and I arrived, we might come and feel welcome. Tomorrow, after we've all gone home and forgotten what kind of flowers were up here today, Nancy Strait will come back and make arrangements with these flowers, and carry them in her car to those on our prayer list or in care facilities. But even before she gets here, Renee Stewart and Mary Lou McCants will come to count the offering, and then on Tuesday Roger Thompson will lead the handymen in fixing and maintaining and improving our building. If you noticed that the pews are shining brighter this morning, well then you have seen the secret work of Van and Marge Williams' hands. This list is only getting started--I could go on. You give rides to church and to doctors. You cook meals for the grieving. You buy groceries for the hungry. You wash dishes after the funeral. You do it because you love each other, because you, too, have been loved by this church. And these are only the things that happen in the life of the Church; how much more do we experience others, often unnoticed, who go about making a life of service. A mother packs her daughter's favorite snack in her lunch box. A son stays with his ailing mother and lets his sister get some rest. A man brings by dinner to his old friend once a week so that she knows she's not forgotten. A crossing guard waves to every car who passes by, just to brighten their day. Serving, serving, serving. Not waiting for an organized service day, but simply living the moments you have, with the people you have, as a servant. It is in these small, hidden acts of service that we give space to grow humility.

Foster says "These tiny corners of life are the genuinely significant realities in the kingdom of God. There is no flash, no glitz, no titanic anything. Today's celebrity culture, captive to its pretentious egoism, simply finds such realities hard to grasp." These acts, these moments of serving, are like chips in the fortress wall--the walls of our culture and of our own hearts, which say that I am the most important, that everything leads back to my own significance, that in the end others need to know that I did enough, accomplished enough, passed on enough.

Martha teaches us that even as we serve, we can be turned back in on ourselves, wondering who is noticing, distracted by whether this makes us look good, judging whoever is not helping. Perhaps, then, service should only be practiced alongside other practices. What if you were to wake up each morning, with a simple prayer: "Who would you like for me to serve today, Lord?" Would you look at people differently throughout the day, wondering if this is the one, or this is the one, whom God has put before you? What if you were to search scripture to find how Jesus served? Would you remember it as you go about your work, your relationships, your daily life? Elisabeth Johnson says "if all our activities leave us with no time to be still in the Lord's presence and hear God's word, we are likely to end up anxious and troubled [like Martha]. We are likely to end up with a kind of service that is devoid of love and joy and is resentful of others."

Service as a follower of Jesus, as a practice of Christian faith, is not just doing, doing, doing. It's not about racking up points to point everyone back to me; instead, our service is paired with time spent at the feet of the one who 'came not to be served, but to serve.' Our servant lives grow with the humility of hidden service, and they grow as fruit when they are connected to the One who is the vine. And then they become lush, and full, connected to Christ, but ready to feed the world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.