

## **WRONG-RIGHT DISTRACTIONS**

Luke 10: 38-42

August 14, 2016

Rev. David S. Cooney

Today our lesson from Luke is a story familiar to many. It is the story of Martha and Mary. Excuse me a minute. I need to check on something. [The sermon is interrupted as I ask different church leaders committee questions and answer a phone call supposedly from Amanda who is on vacation.] Sorry about that. Where was I? Sorry. I was talking about Martha and Mary.

So here is the situation. Luke tells us that when Jesus entered a certain village, a woman named Martha invited him into her home. I don't know why Luke is being somewhat mysterious here. We know Martha lived in Bethany with her sister Mary and her brother Lazarus. They were supporters and friends of Jesus. In the gospel of John their home is his headquarters whenever he visits Jerusalem, since Bethany is just a few miles to the east. Of course, the chronologies in the gospels differ, so perhaps this was the first time they had met or spent time together, meaning they were not as familiar and known to Luke and others as they were later to John. At the very least, here Martha is interested in Jesus and invites him to her home. To her great joy, no doubt, he accepted.

Of course, there was the small problem that wherever Jesus went twelve grown men followed. So Martha was not just welcoming one person to her home, she was welcoming thirteen. Thirteen people were coming to her home and she had no time to prepare.

When was the last time you had company? Did you invite thirteen or more? If so, did they all bring something or were you responsible for everything? Did you do any cleaning, or at least a little straightening before they came? Did you do a little extra shopping so that even if you were not serving a meal, you would have a little something to eat and drink available? The answer is probably yes to all of these questions. Hey, if someone just shows up at the door, unexpected and unannounced, then you are dressed however you are dressed and the house looks however the house looks and you can offer only what happens to be on hand and, if that is nothing, so be it. Ah, but when you invite persons over, you make sure you are cleaned up and the house is cleaned up and it looks like you are expecting them. This is what we do. Every week we have welcome teams and worship helpers who come here long before the service begins to make sure everything is in order so that you can be properly greeted and you can participate in a service that has been carefully prepared for you.

This was Martha's dilemma. She invited Jesus to her home, but maybe it was not until Jesus said yes that it dawned on her: she had thirteen guests coming to her home – one of those guests being a miracle-working rabbi about whom all the nation was abuzz – and she had no time to prepare. She had to get things straightened up, properly welcome them and make sure they were comfortable, and get on the hotline to Butterball to learn the fastest way to defrost and cook a turkey. Wait. Is turkey kosher? I know she wasn't doing steamed crabs or a pig roast. I don't know about turkey. Maybe she was mixing up a batch of falafel. I don't know. Whatever she was working on, you get the point.

It was a hectic time for Martha as she did her best to be the hostess with the mostest. And she was O.K. with it, except for one thing. Her little sister Mary was not doing one thing to help. While Martha was bustling in the kitchen so she could offer their guests refreshments, Mary sat in the living room with the men, soaking up the words of Jesus, oblivious to her sister's need for help.

Anybody have a sibling like that? Thanksgiving or Christmas is never at their house. When everyone brings something, they somehow can't. Time to clean up? They have to leave. Well, Martha, the responsible one, was flitting around like a moth at a light while Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to the conversation.

Martha fumed. It doesn't say this, but we can be sure that every time she came into the room to bring some more food or to refill drinks, she shot Mary some piercing looks – not just darts – arrows on fire. She probably gave her a subtle or not-so-subtle kick every time she walked past her or had to step over her. The message of her body language was surely unmistakable, yet there was no response. Nothing. Mary was oblivious to her. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, Martha blurted out to Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." She did not like having to call out her sister like that, but Mary had left her no choice. Undoubtedly, this embarrassed Mary. Good. She should be embarrassed because she should have been helping out all along.

We might suspect that Jesus was thinking, "Whoa! How did I end up in the middle of a sibling spat?" He might have been looking for the door. He knew better than to get between warring sisters. Or, maybe not, because he responded to Martha but, to her shock, he corrected her, not Mary. "Martha, Martha," he said. "You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need for only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Ouch! What had promised to be a spectacular day, the Lord Jesus visiting her home, was turning instead into a nightmare. First she was frantic trying to be hospitable.

Then her sister offered no help. Then Jesus, instead of rebuking Mary, rebuked her. How was that possible? She was the one being responsible. She was the one being hospitable. She was the one caring for her guests. Why was she the one in the wrong?

Jesus explained it when he said there is need of only one thing. He was not talking about fixing just one snack instead of three. He was not talking about providing one act of hospitality instead of many. He was talking about himself. Martha had wisely invited Jesus into her home. But while the Son of God sat in her living room, she was in the kitchen. That is the crux of this story right there. While the Son of God sat in her living room, she was in the kitchen.

There is need of only one thing. What is that thing? Jesus. Mary knew it. That is why she was planted next to Jesus. Martha missed it. Martha did not grasp that she needed Jesus more than Jesus needed some crab dip and a cold beer. Martha did not grasp that she needed the bread of life more than Jesus needed some bread and cheese. Now, being hospitable is a good thing. All things being equal, it is a worthy distraction, a right distraction. But all things are not equal when Jesus is in the room. Then it can be a wrong-right distraction. If something takes you away from Jesus, however right it is, it is wrong. Jesus was in the room and Martha was not. Martha invited Jesus into her home and then disappeared to cook a pot roast. It is the wrong-right distraction.

I am not piling on Martha. We all can be guilty of this, with others as well as with Jesus. Have you ever invited over people you wanted to see, people you enjoy being around, and then been so busy hosting that you spent no time with your guests? Have you had opportunity to go somewhere special or do something special but turned it down because you had chores to do? Have you ever been so consumed providing for your children that you had no time to spend with your children? Have you had a chance to get together for lunch with a good friend, perhaps one you do not see often, and spent the entire time on your phone because you had calls you needed to make or messages to which you needed to respond? Have you missed a beautiful sunset because you wanted to finish the dishes first? Did the sun wait for you?

The point is that these are appropriate, good, right distractions. Not all are. My interrupting the service and sermon to ask about church questions or answer my phone or send a text are simply wrong distractions. That was rude and inappropriate. I trust you know I was only playing with you to make a point. Lots of distractions are just wrong. Many, though, are right. It was right for Martha to want to care for her guests. But sometimes even right can be wrong.

This is not just Martha's issue. Jesus was especially close to her that day. There are times Jesus is especially close to us. They may be planned or unplanned, expected or

unexpected times. It may be in a time of prayer, or on a walk in the woods, or in a hospital bed, or while serving in a soup kitchen, or when family is gathered around the table, or in a worship service, or while sitting in traffic, or while hanging out with friends. Who knows?

The question then becomes, what do we do then? Do we, like Mary, stop what we are doing and plop ourselves down right next to his chair, or, like Martha, do we get distracted by everything else that is going on? If Christ comes alive during our morning devotions, do we linger longer or do we say amen, shut the Bible, and head out because the allotted time is over? Do we quickly say our prayers and get on with life or actually wait a while to listen? Is it possible we miss Jesus even though he is in our living room because we are in the kitchen distracted by the wrong-right reasons? It occurs to me that we want God to be there when we are ready to be with him. I wonder if we are there when God is ready to be with us. Are we willing to stop what we are doing for Jesus, because only one thing is needful?

More questions than answers, I know. But these are questions I cannot answer for you. We each have to discern for ourselves whether we are Martha or Mary, or even which we want to be. My guess is that the answer for most of us is a little of both. If we want to know Christ's opinion about it, we need only remember that Jesus said that Mary chose the better portion. Hmmm.

Amen.