

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “The Better Part” (Luke 10:38-42)**

**July 18, 2010**

Last week Dave Zahl preached a great sermon about Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. This week I’m preaching on the succeeding passage from the Gospel According to Luke, today’s passage about Jesus’ visit with Martha and Mary. Luke is only one of the four gospel writers who records this episode.

Jesus and his disciples are welcomed into the home of a woman named Martha, who lived with her younger sister, Mary, in the small town of Bethany. Martha graciously welcomed Jesus and his disciples into her home and began scurrying about doing various tasks that hosts were expected to do. She was the dutiful older sibling. Meanwhile, her younger sister, Mary, was simply sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to what he was saying.

Perhaps you have experienced these dynamics in your house—the responsible older siblings busily getting done what needs to get done while the younger siblings chill out ☺. I imagine Martha was a gracious host, and that she meticulously tended to her duties, but her attention was not on Jesus. Luke tells us that Martha was “distracted by her many tasks.” She felt pulled in many directions at the same time, and had grown tired and irritable.

Can you relate?

During the summer there is a TV show called *Wipeout* that comes on—apparently it’s not good enough for the regular TV season. In this show contestants put on a helmet and proceed to complete “the world’s largest obstacle course.” Wipeout is not so much about the obstacles themselves, but about the distractions that await you as you try to complete it. These distractions include the “Sucker Punch” (a wall out of which come random punching gloves), “Spikes of Doom” (a wall with spikes that swings at you), and “Sweeper Arms” (large pillars that rotate like helicopter blades). Nobody completes the obstacle course without getting knocked off their feet by these distractions. It’s a hilarious show and my family and I laugh and laugh while watching it.

The problem is, when it comes to distractions that knock us off our feet, it’s more than a silly summer TV show; it’s real life. Often while trying to complete the various obstacles in our lives we are knocked off our feet by distractions, distractions that are anything but funny, distractions that often cause pain; as the Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn sings in *The Whole Night Sky*: “Sometimes a wind comes out of nowhere and knocks you sideways. And look, see my tears, they fill the whole night sky.”

In today’s passage we see Martha distracted by many things. Jesus Christ himself is in her house and she is still distracted, frenetically running about, thinking the whole time that she is serving him, that she is providing him with the kind of hospitality he is looking for, but she’s not. In

fact, it's her younger sister, Mary, the one is apparently *not* distracted, the one who is *not* scurrying about, the one who is not doing anything but listening to him—it is Mary who is offering Jesus the kind of hospitality he is looking for.

This greatly annoys Martha, who is annoyed with Mary because she is just sitting there, and annoyed with Jesus because apparently he doesn't care. In her busyness in attempting to serve the Lord Martha has become completely self-centered. Her efforts were not really focused on providing hospitality for Jesus, but on getting done what she wanted to get done. This self-centeredness is clear in what she tells 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*."

And how does Jesus respond to Martha? He does not say, "You're right, Martha. Mary is a slacker; if only she could be as productive as you." He does not rebuke Mary, "How can you just sit there while your sister does all the work? Mary, you are a slacker." Instead, Jesus responds: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

Jesus repeats her name, "Martha, Martha," to show that his focus is entirely on her, to show that he in fact does care, to show his compassion, and then he cuts to the heart of what's really going on in Martha's life: "you are worried and distracted by many things." Martha's fatigue and irritability was not rooted in her efforts to provide hospitality or in her annoyance with Mary or Jesus; her fatigue and irritability were rooted in the worries and distractions of her life.

Martha struggled inwardly with worry and outwardly with distractions.

Can you relate?

Have you ever gone on vacation to "get away from it all" only to find out that "it all" follows you? That's because we cannot get away from the inward worries that we all have. They don't leave us alone. They just keep hounding us, even on vacation, just like the hilarious 1991 film, *What About Bob?* in which the neurotic Bob Wiley (played by Bill Murray) hounds his stressed out psychiatrist, Dr. Leo Marvin (played by Richard Dreyfuss). Dr. Marvin goes on vacation to New Hampshire, delighted with the prospect of leaving all his worries back in New York, including Bob Wiley, but Wiley seeks him out in New Hampshire and never goes away. Ultimately Dr. Marvin goes crazy and Bob Wiley is "cured" and ends up marrying Dr. Marvin's sister and becoming a permanent part of his family.

If I were to ask you to tell me today what you are worried about, what would you tell me? Every week people talk to me about the things in their lives that cause worry—a frightening medical diagnosis, family dysfunction, a marriage on the rocks, a child in trouble, doubts about their faith, a secret addiction, self-hatred, a major financial setback. Like Martha, we are worried about many things.

And also like Martha, we are distracted by many things.

We have umpteen different things to help us live supposedly more productive lives but often they simply create more distractions—for example, a phone that you not only use for talking but for taking photos, recording video, watching movies, playing music, checking email, with hundreds of different apps to buy. I was recently riding in a new hybrid car a couple months ago with a friend and on the dashboard was a computer animation of his engine and what all the levels of the fluids were, how many miles per gallon he was getting at that precise speed, the outside temperature, inside temperature, and many other stats. My friend laughed and turned it off—“Pretty cool,” he said, “but it’s distracting.”

And just like people talk to me each week about things that worry them they also talk to me about the distractions in their lives that stress them out, distractions that carry much greater consequences than phone apps or dashboard monitors—kids distracted by what others think of them or temptations to drugs and alcohol, people whose marriage is not in a good place distracted by unexpected feelings for someone other than their spouse, employees distracted by what looks like a more enticing job possibility, stressed out people distracted by things they think will take the edge off the pain in their lives (like alcohol or pornography) but ultimately create only more pain. These distractions are dangerous, and can knock us sideways.

And in the same way we cannot escape our inward worries by going on vacation we cannot escape our outward distractions either. A couple weeks ago I was on the Christ Church Habitat for Humanity trip to West Virginia. The two dozen guys on the trip slept in a single bunk room, and at night there were times when it was a veritable symphony of snoring. One night I awoke about 3:00 and could not get back to sleep because the snoring was so loud, so I took my sleeping bag to the upstairs meeting room to crash on a couch. One of our other guys was already in the room, soundly sleeping on one of the other couches. I read for awhile and eventually went back to sleep. When I awoke the other guy was gone, and I thought nothing of it. Later that week I found out that he had originally gone up there for the same reason I had, to escape the snoring and try to get back to sleep. Although he was asleep when I got there, after I fell asleep, guess who’s snoring woke him up? He told me he was freaking out—there was no escape from the snoring—so he just went back to the bunkroom and made the best of it while I slept and snored away ☺. Sometimes there is no escaping the distractions in our lives.

But the good news is that Jesus meets us in that place, in the midst of the worries and distractions of our lives, with care and compassion, just like he did with Martha: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.”

And then Jesus, ironically enough, points Martha to her sister, Mary. “There is need of only one thing,” Jesus tells her, “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (I’m sure Martha felt really blessed by that ☺).

While Martha was running amok, trying to serve Jesus, worried and distracted, Mary was simply sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to him, and *that* was the kind of hospitality Jesus was looking for.

Mary had chosen the better part. Mary was drawn not only to who Jesus was, but also to what he was saying, and she felt compelled to sit and listen. Have you ever read a book that you can't put down? Have you ever been in a rich conversation with a friend that you wished would never end? Have you ever been driving and heard a song on the radio that is so good you have to listen to the whole thing, if it means waiting in your car in your driveway until it ends? Have you ever walked outside at the end of a workday and been stopped in your tracks by a stunningly beautiful evening sky or sunset? When something really resonates with us, when something touches us in our hearts, when something ministers life to us, sometimes, just like Mary, we can do nothing else but sit and take it in.

Luke is silent about what Jesus was talking about with Mary and the disciples, but obviously was ministering life to her, and she simply sat there and listened. Apparently Jesus was not yelling at her and telling her what was wrong with her life. On the TV show, *The Office*, Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell) described his view on what an intervention is: "An intervention is sort of hard to describe, but really it's a surprise party for people who have addictions. And you get in their face and you scream at them and you make them feel really bad about themselves. And then they stop" ☺. Jesus was not performing that kind of intervention. Instead, he was speaking words of life to Mary.

During the Great Depression a young boy from a poor farming family in Arkansas spent his days working the cotton fields and his nights listening to the radio. He could not stop listening to the music. His father was a hard man, scarred by the pressures and pains of life, a man who, like Martha, was worried and distracted by many things. He thought his son's love for music was an utter waste of time. But his son, like Mary, could not stop listening to the radio. The music resonated deep within him. The music ministered life to him. That boy was Johnny Cash, who became a music legend, whose songs have resonated with millions of people, including me. And when he was inducted in the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1980, his dad was sitting in the front row. Although with regards to his love for music Johnny Cash's dad was originally like Martha, eventually he became more like Mary, eventually he chose the better part.

So what happened to Martha and Mary after this episode? Luke is silent about this. In fact, Luke never mentions Martha and Mary again. But John does. In John's account of the gospel we see that late in Jesus' ministry this same Martha and Mary had a brother named Lazarus who died, and Jesus went to see them. While he was on his way, Martha met him and told him, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Jesus then told her, "I am the resurrection and the life... those who believe in me, even though they die, will live... Do you believe this?" And how did Martha respond? "Yes, Lord," she said, "I believe." And as you know, Jesus indeed raised Lazarus from the dead. Later Martha had a dinner party and invited Jesus. And that's when Mary appears on the scene again, this time with costly perfume which she poured on Jesus feet, which she also wiped with her hair. Mary gave the most valuable thing she owned in grateful worship of Jesus. Mary anointed him ahead of time for his burial.

For you see, the better part is a relationship with Jesus Christ, the One who created us and redeemed us; the One who knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us so much that he died for us; the One who understands all the worries and distractions in our lives and, as he did for Martha, meets us with compassion, and calls us by name. Jesus was knocked sideways by our sins, and nailed to a cross, where he atoned for them, all of them. And because Jesus, just as he told Martha, is indeed the resurrection and the life, he gives us the hope of eternal life as well. A relationship with Jesus Christ does not make the worries and distractions go away, but it gives us hope in the midst of them, hope that as Paul wrote to the Colossians, the blood Jesus shed on the cross indeed has and will reconcile all things to himself, including the things that worry and distract us. In the meantime he offers us the better part, a relationship with him.

I'll close with one more story, one I'm sharing with permission. Last week we had a visitor to Christ Church who is from an unchurched background, someone who had questions about Christianity. She was moved by the worship service and wanted to talk, so we met on Thursday and talked for awhile. She told me that although she was happily married and had a good job, she felt like something was missing in her life. I simply explained the basics of the gospel to her—that God created us and loves us, that we are fully known and fully loved, that God loves us so much that he sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross to pay the price for all our sins, that he offers us forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, the hope of eternal life, all as a free gift. She prayed to receive Christ into her life right then, wiping tears from her eyes afterwards. Then she asked about being baptized. We went through the baptism liturgy together from *The Book of Common Prayer* and she was baptized today at the 9:00 service. Her name is Jessica, and like Mary, she chose the better part, a relationship with Jesus Christ.

So be encouraged today. If you, like me, are often like Martha, “worried and distracted by many things,” remember that God loves you as much now as he ever has, and that he offers you anew today the better part, a relationship with him. Amen.