



Westminster  
Presbyterian Church  
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

**Martha**  
**Luke 10:38-42**

Today's text is Luke 10:38-42, hear the word:

**“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’**

**“Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’”**

I give thanks to God for all the members of the church who are dedicated to making sure everything is ready. We simply would not be effective in our mission without members who come early and stay late. They cook meals and then clean-up after the meals. They prepare Communion elements, organize closets, and clean up messes. They work in the yard, fix broken sprinkler heads, and find toilet paper when it is lacking. They purchase all the items necessary and then fix 412 meals for the band. The list goes on and on, but the church would not survive very long without a membership full of Martha's.

I am sorry that over the years the original Martha has taken a bad rap. Jesus is in her home, her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet, while Martha is worried about the domestic chores. But somebody has to make everything ready. Someone has to clean the guest room, put cut flowers on the night stand by the bed, dust, vacuum, mop, chop the onions and peppers, brown the ground beef, grate the cheese, roll it all in tortillas, and puts the enchiladas in the oven. The table has to be set with the best linen napkins. The silver must be polished. And Mary sits in the living room at the feet of Jesus.

Martha on the verge of exhaustion, asks her sister for a little help, and what she gets is a rebuke. **“Martha you are busy over many things, but only one is**

**necessary, and your sister Mary has chosen the better, and I will not take it from her by telling her to get up and help.”**

I have to admit that Jesus’ response to Martha’s plea for help bothers me a bit. I mean someone has to prepare the dinner if there is going to be a meal. And who would want to invite Jesus into a messy and dirty house? If Jesus paid a visit to our church building, I would not want to take him to my office; I cannot seem to keep the place straight. I don’t know if it is a sign of a cluttered mind, a creative mind or ADD, but before Jesus comes it needs some work.

A church cannot survive without the Martha’s. For it is true that if all we did at church is worship, pray and study the Scripture we would not be a church. We need the workers; we have to have the Martha’s to be church. We need folks who will not only pray for the church, but do the mission of the church. We need folks who are willing to dirty their fingernails, and blister their hands to do the work. And the good news is that we are a church of Martha’s. Actually, I think there is a little of Martha and a little of Mary in everyone here this morning.

Now to be sure Jesus does not criticize Martha for her hospitality. He does not criticize Martha for taking care of the domestic chores. What Jesus wants to correct in Martha is her focus. Why is she working so hard? Is it because she is afraid Jesus is going to put on a white glove and run his finger over the top of the door frame. Or is she working hard in order to please Jesus? Is she working so hard because the condition of her house is a reflection of her and she wants to look good? Or, is she working as best as she can for the glory of God? It is a matter of focus.

In the Gospel According to John, there is recorded another incident that will tell us a little more about Martha. Her brother Lazarus is critically ill. Mary and Martha send word to Jesus. Jesus does not drop everything to come, but he waits and when Jesus finally arrives Lazarus has died. The house is filled with mourners. When Jesus comes four days later, Martha drops what she was doing and runs to confront Jesus. “Where have you been? What has delayed you? If you had been here earlier you could have kept my brother from dying.” And there on the dusty road Martha and Jesus have a heart to heart conversation about death and resurrection.

Martha says, **“I believe my brother will rise on resurrection day...”** And Jesus give a defining Christian message, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believe in me will never die.”** Do you believe that Martha?”

**“Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”** The confrontation speaks volumes about Martha. Theologian Elisabeth Moltmann writes, “Martha is not a woman who keeps silence. She does not leave theology to the theologian. She does not throw herself at Jesus’ feet as Mary did a few minutes later. She does not give in. She struggles with God as Job did. She charges Jesus with failure. She wrestles with God as Jacob did.” **“If you had come when I sent for you my brother would not have died.”**

I am inspired by the challenging faith of Martha, who was willing to ask questions, say what was on her mind, all the while working her fingers to the bone taking care of her guest. Oh, yes we need the Martha’s to challenge our theology, and to set the example of doing what is necessary. But maybe what Martha did not understand is that in her daily routine, in her work, taking care of our chores that we also with Jesus.

Jesus was not critical of Martha’s work, but he criticizes her for allowing her work to become a distraction to what is most important. This is a lesson we need to learn. It is true that we can find God wherever we are and whatever we are doing; yet, sometimes our commitment to what we are doing can distract us from something more important. That was Martha’s problem. She was distracted, as we all can be by our daily chores. But, maybe this story can help us become aware that if we can keep from being distracted, we can realize the very presence of Christ in all that we do.

If one wants to learn how to understand the presence of God in our routine task, you should read “Practicing the Presence of God,” by Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence lived in a French monastery during the seventeenth century. Living in a monastery, he participated in the daily rhythm of prayer: seven periods during the day, a total of three hours of prayer every day. I think Mary would have loved to have lived that contemplative life, but not Martha, nor Brother Lawrence. He found this practice to be most difficult. He didn’t seem particularly close to God while he while kneeling in praying with his brothers in the chapel.

Lawrence felt closer to God, and authentically praise God, even prayed to God by practicing the presence of God in the kitchen where like Martha he worked to prepare meals. Maybe that is why his pancakes were so good.

It was while working with pots and pans that Brother Lawrence prayed and knew the presence of God, and the little book composed of his notes and reflections, published after his death has become a spiritual classic. His idea was

simple, with the use of the imagination; he tried to recognize the presence of God in his every task.

I have a preacher friend who attempts to do this with the use of an empty chair. In his office there is always an empty chair, and whenever he is working in his office he imagines Jesus sitting in that chair, and that thought affects his every task.

He plays on the church softball team, and he imagines Jesus sitting on the bench, and that thought affects his witness and his conduct on the softball field. At home at the dinner table there is an empty chair and he and his wife remember Jesus' presence with the family. And I wondered if intentionally remembered the presence of Christ at the ballpark watching the Rangers. It does not look like such a practice is any help to the Rangers, but it is a help to him as he endures the season.

And of course it is much more than imagining, Jesus is really there as he is with us. Paul says be constant in prayer and Brother Lawrence tells us how to do it.

I will admit that I cannot think of a time when I spent three hours in prayer with my head bowed and my eyes closed. I go to sleep every time, but you can understand God's presence throughout the day. And I would much rather serve a church of Martha's who understand God's presence in their work, than a church of Mary's who spend every moment in the sanctuary getting nothing done.

Martha's problem is that she was so distracted by her work she forgot the presence of Christ. Don't get so busy that you forget.

Christ is there at every moment of leisure. Christ is there as you work in your occupation. Christ is there at the dinner table. Christ is there when you are fixing sprinkler heads in the church lawn. Christ is there when you are dusting the sanctuary. Christ is there when you make 412 sandwiches for the band. Christ is there when you mentor a child at Reguet. Christ is there when you collect food for Project HOPE. Christ is there when you are offering your time on other mission projects.

Barbara Brown Taylor remembers Brother Lawrence, praising God while peeling potatoes and making pancakes. Taylor surprised her many readers by confessing that she is a failure at conventional prayer. She wrote, "When people ask me about my prayer life, I feel like a bulimic must feel when people ask her about her favorite dish." She learned in seminary, as we all learn, that there are

many kinds of prayer: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, intercession, and petition. She came, however, to prefer a new notion of prayer she heard from a friend, a Benedictine monk: “The heart of prayer,” who wrote, “Prayer is waking up to God.”

Barbara wrote, “When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever *God has* put right in front of me; when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive; when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment *given to me by God*, then I am in prayer.”

This monk told her once that “even biting into a carrot can be a kind of prayer. ”Many of us when eating a carrot, will take a bite, and get it down as quick as we can so we can move on to the next bite or next activity. But to experience the moment is to take a bite, and know of its crispness, and enjoy its flavor giving thanks for the moment.

That was Martha’s problem, she was just working. She swallowed the carrot without enjoying the carrot. Do you know what I am talking about?

Martha, in the kitchen, and Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet, are places where God is present and prayer happens. However, in Martha’s case, her incessant activity distracted her. Her good and necessary and God-filled work was actually interfering with her realization of the presence of Christ.

In our computerized world it is hard not to get distracted. Thomas Friedman describes a taxi ride from Paris to Charles de Gaulle airport. The driver and he did six things: the driver drove, talked on his cell, and watched a video. Friedman rode, worked on his laptop, and listened to iTunes. “The only thing we didn’t do was talk to each other.” “The Disease of the Internet Age,” Friedman says, is “continuous partial attention.” We’re so busy e-mailing, texting, that we’re not paying attention to what’s happening, to the people around us.

You can find God wherever you are and whatever you are doing. But sometimes your commitment to what you are doing can distract you from something more important.

So wake up to God. Practice the presence of God and pay attention to what is priceless and precious and is always right in front of you. Brother Lawrence,

Martha in the kitchen, you and I doing what we do every day, are in the presence of the holy, the sacred.

The next time you are busy making sure everything is ready; remember why you are making it ready. You are making it ready to the glory of the God who is present with you in the moment.

When you prepare a meal for the youth, or other occasion, when you prepare Communion, organize a closet, clean up messes, work in the yard, fix broken sprinkler head, find toilet paper when it is lacking, help prepare a meal for 412 band students, remember why you are doing it. You do it to the glory of God who is present. Amen.