

Martha was distracted. Are we?

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

7th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 11, Yr. C. July 18, 2004. (Luke 10:38-42.)

A Houston woman and her family went on vacation in a small New England town where the actor Paul Newman has a home. One Saturday morning the woman got up early to take a walk, and when she got back, she was seized with the craving for a double-dip chocolate ice cream cone. So she hopped in her car, drove to the center of town, and went straight to the combination bakery-ice cream parlor. The only other customer in the store happened to be none other than Paul Newman himself, sitting at the counter having a donut and coffee. The woman's heart skipped a beat as her eyes made contact with the movie star's baby-blues. He nodded politely and the woman nodded back. She composed herself and thought "I'm a mature 45-year-old woman, not a star-struck kid." The counter-man filled her order. She took the double-dip chocolate ice cream cone in one hand and her change in the other and went out the door without even a glance over at the famous actor. When she got to the car, she realized she had a handful of change, but the other hand was empty. No cone. She thought: "What did I do with my cone? I probably left it in the store!" So back into the store she went, expecting the cone to be still in the clerk's hand, or in one of those little cardboard holders on the counter, or somewhere. Paul Newman swiveled around on his stool and gave her that familiar grin. He said, "It's in your purse!"

In this story, the woman was so *distracted* by her encounter with a famous movie star that she did something silly. (That never would have happened in Aspen, of course.) —But the ordinary distractions we deal with in our lives aren't usually funny.

Martha of Bethany, her sister Mary, and her brother Lazarus were three of Jesus' closest friends. We don't know the exact nature of their relationship, but it was obviously very intimate. He was a frequent visitor in their home. Martha seems to have been the head of the family. In fact, Luke says that the place where they lived was "Martha's house." We can guess that she was the oldest of the three. Lazarus may have been very young, not much more than a child, and Mary was the younger of the two sisters, maybe only a little older than their brother.

Martha was the kind of person who took every responsibility seriously. She was "the Lady of the House," and when Jesus of Nazareth came to visit – no doubt accompanied by twelve hungry men – Martha had a lot of work to do. She didn't have a house full of servants, and she couldn't have afforded a caterer, even if there had been people who did that in those days.

We assume that until Jesus got to the house, young Mary had been helping her big sister with the meal preparations. But when Jesus arrived and started talking to Lazarus and the other male guests, Mary eventually left the cooking fire and went over to listen. Good manners of that age dictated that men and women not socialize together in mixed company unless they were kin – and even then the women usually sat together, apart from the men. The men talked to one another on one side of the courtyard, and the women talked to one another on the other side – the part that functioned as the kitchen. (...Well, maybe things haven't changed much in 2000 years.)

Anyway, we have to figure that Mary started out helping Martha with the cooking, just listening to Jesus as best she could with one ear. But gradually she became oblivious to decent manners and, leaving her work behind, drifted over to join the men because she was so moved by what she heard Jesus saying. Martha saw her younger sister as distracted from her *proper* place and task... and she appealed to Jesus for help. (In addition, Martha probably felt a little sorry for herself, because she would have *liked* to sit and listen to Jesus too, if nobody else had been around and there hadn't been so much work to do.)

Martha came up to Jesus and said – probably in a "stage whisper" – "Master, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to get up and come help me!"

Jesus' answer is very instructive. He didn't rebuke Martha, but he told her that it wasn't Mary that was *distracted*, but rather diligent, responsible, hard-working, very proper Martha herself. He said to her, "*Martha, Martha! You are worried and distracted by so many things. But only one thing is needed. Mary has made the better choice, and I won't take it away from her.*"

Sociologists tell us that Americans are the hardest working people on earth. American men have traditionally looked for identity, fulfillment and meaning in their work. Now, more and more American women are joining them. Typically, people in our country work longer hours, take fewer days off, and are more productive than anybody anywhere else in the world. Even on vacation, Americans tend to check in with the office every few days or take along a laptop computer and a briefcase full of business papers. (...Does this sound familiar?)

Businesses have learned that they can make ever-increasing demands on employees... trading off salaries and the perks that go with promotion for the devotion and time commitment that people once-upon-a-time gave to family and other personal relationships...and to God.

Work and productivity have become the real “American Idol.” *And all “idolatry” involves a misdirected pursuit of personal spiritual fulfillment – looking for the right thing in the wrong place.* It’s the putting of an inferior substitute in the place that belongs to God alone.

The “idolatry of work” is reinforced by the money our work earns for us. Work hard; get rich. That’s the American way. Money allows us to buy things to fill the spiritual emptiness that exists in our lives because we’re working too hard. But that approach doesn’t really help, because consumerism is an insatiable craving. No matter what we have, we somehow always want something *different*, and so the sad chase continues.

I see Martha of Bethany as a good, practical person who found meaning and identity, her *value* really, in being a hard-working, responsible household-manager and provider for her two younger siblings. Martha didn’t make money from the kind of hard work she did, but she felt deep satisfaction in doing that work well.

Jesus loved Martha. That’s why he told her a hard truth. He appreciated her intentions and all that she was doing, but he said that she was *worried and distracted*. Mary, her sister and maybe her *alter ego*, was *not* distracted. Mary was not obsessed with “doing the proper thing,” and she knew how to find meaning and value apart from work and productivity. Mary looked for meaning and fulfillment in another place... sitting at the feet of Jesus.

This little story in Luke’s gospel follows immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which we read last Sunday. Jesus told about the Good Samaritan in order to illustrate what was meant by the Bible verse that says, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Maybe Luke puts the incident in the home of Martha and Mary next in order to exemplify for us the verse that goes along with that one, which in fact takes precedence over it: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*”

This story demands that we ask ourselves a question...especially those of us who have made an idol of working hard and being productive —whether it’s working at our paying job, or working in our kitchen, or even working at the “good deeds” of charity or the Church. —*Is it possible that we’ve let ourselves become distracted?* Do we know, as Mary knew, how to choose “the one thing that is needed”?

There’s a new proverb on the Christ Church sign board this week. Maybe you noticed it as you walked in. It says: “*The best things in life aren’t things.*”

Martha loved Jesus and wanted to do the proper thing: to provide all the good food that he and his companions might need or want to eat. Mary loved Jesus too, and didn’t want to miss a single word he said. Here’s bit of truth to take with you today: *To love is to listen.* (Sometimes, listening is even more loving than serving is.)

The Christian life is a balanced life. It has its Martha side, and it has its Mary side. It includes hard work and giving of ourselves for the benefit of others. But it also includes sitting at the feet of Jesus. I want to suggest that this week, no matter how much work there is to do, let’s find time to be still and listen. The Lord wants to talk to us. To love him is to listen.