

WGUMC August 24, 2014 Luke 10:38-42
"Inseparable Sisters"

When I thought about the Gospel lesson for this morning, I couldn't help but have an end-of-summer fantasy, one that I'm pretty certain a lot of women would enjoy. I'm seeing Jesus and his entourage in Bethany, a little town just a few miles southeast of Jerusalem. They arrive at the home of his good friends—two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. Remember, Lazarus is the one that Jesus raises from the dead in the Gospel of John.

Now Jesus isn't just dropping in to say hello. When Martha welcomes him into her home, she knows she is accepting the honor of serving not only Jesus but all his groupies as well. That's as if your spouse calls and says, "I'm bringing everyone from the office home for dinner tonight. See you in half an hour." So Martha needs all the help she can get, and there's sister Mary, must be her kid sister, sitting at Jesus' feet instead of helping in the kitchen.

You know the story. Martha complains about her slacker sister, and Jesus gently rebukes her. Martha comes out looking like a nag and Mary gets all the glory. But in my fantasy, there's a different ending to this story. What happens instead is: Jesus looks up to see Martha rushing about, trying to accommodate everyone's needs and still get a special meal on the table, and after a thoughtful minute, Jesus says to her: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Come, sit down here by me. Boys—Peter, James, John, and all the rest—the kitchen is yours. Call us when dinner is ready."

My pulse quickens just thinking about that fantasy, but alas, then I have to get back to reality. The fact is that this text is just loaded with all kinds of assumptions about social rules and gender roles. But even when I put those things aside, I still want to resist one of the most common interpretations of this text. It boils down to this: Some of us are like Martha and

we should all be more like Mary. We get caught up in lives of action, when we should be pursuing a life of contemplation.

Now, for someone who is working on a rummage sale, and planning a stewardship campaign, capital campaign, nominations for next year, and church conference, this is not a very helpful interpretation. Most of us don't have the option of disengaging from an active life. No one is going to support us while we go off to meditate on a mountaintop. But this is not the choice that Jesus is putting in front of us. So this is not going to be a sermon about action vs. contemplation. Instead, let's start with a lesson about attitude vs. beatitude.

The problem in this story is not Martha's priority (someone had to fix the meal), but her lack of charity. What we have here is some classic sibling rivalry. In any family, it seems like someone is always doing all the work and someone else is getting off easy. When I was a little girl, we used to visit my dad's parents in a little town called Oxford, Nebraska. All the

female cousins were put to work around mealtimes: peeling potatoes, setting the table, washing the dishes, while all the male cousins sat out on the porch shooting bull with Grandpa.

I'm sure you can tell a story like that, so you know how it is. And human nature being what it is, the resentment starts to build. Pretty soon, whatever joy you might have taken in a task is ruined by the thought of that no-good-bum getting off again. Why doesn't my sister or my brother ever come and take care of cranky old dad? Why doesn't my spouse ever go to the PTA meetings, the soccer practice, the blankety-blank office?

Jesus knows that Martha is distracted, not by the work, but by the one is not working. And whatever she's fixing for dinner, it's going to taste like sour grapes. So Jesus says to Martha, gently, you've got to let go of that resentment or it will ruin you. It will keep you from holding onto the one thing you really need, which is Me. I can't be there for you, because your resentment is like a wall between you and me.

Besides that, Jesus knows there's the anxiety that goes along with the resentment. What we're worried about is that we feel ALL the responsibility: "This thing is all on me, God. If I fail, there is no one to share the blame with me. If this dinner is lousy, if this house isn't clean, if this body isn't beautiful, if this company isn't successful, if this marriage isn't working, if my child isn't excelling, what does it say about me? And isn't it all about me?"

That's the attitude, when what we need is beatitude. Fortunately, there is a way for work to be a blessing and not just a burden. And I learned it from some 18th century Methodist women. Back then, John Wesley had a bunch of female groupies. On top of their domestic duties, they kept busy teaching, preaching, leading classes, visiting the sick, and caring for the dying.

But they discovered that even doing God's work, they sometimes lost their sense of God. Then they'd say, "My mind

is all unhinged today." And that's when they would recall this story. But they didn't berate themselves for being like Martha when they should have been more like Mary. These very active ladies knew that the way to follow Jesus was to combine the two. In a letter to Wesley, one of them writes:

You ask, whether I am fully employed for a good Master. When I would attempt to answer, my spirit sinks into confusion at his adorable feet, conscious how little I am capable of doing for him. Thus far, however, I can say, in all I do his glory is my aim; and so graciously does he deal with me, that, *when I am called to serve with Martha's hands, I feel a Mary's heart*; and, when engaged more immediately in his blessed service, it is my delight. I remain, Rev. and dear Sir, your unworthy child, E[lizabeth] Ritchie.

Now forget the language of this eighteenth-century letter and you have a good twenty-first-century solution to the problems of Silicon Valley living. We have so many more distractions than these women had, so many more ways for our minds to become unhinged. If we could just find a way to feel a Mary's heart while we serve with Martha's hands, think how

much better life would be, not only for us, but for everyone around us.

Of course, we can always take psychiatric drugs to keep our mental traffic from heading down the road of resentment or getting on the highway of anxiety. But we're going to need a spiritual discipline if we want to practice mindfulness. And to do this, you don't have to be a Buddhist. We can all practice sitting at the feet of Jesus even while we're working away. Metaphorically, that's saying, "Hey, Jesus, you and Mary come on into the kitchen, so I can hear what you all are saying."

One thing is for certain: whether we're in the kitchen or a conference room, the work is not going to let up. But Jesus isn't asking us to sit down and drop out. He wants us to dive in. Be more alert, more alive. Be mindful of God in every moment.

But I wonder how many times a day the average Christian has a consciousness of God? In my last church, there was

James, a construction worker, who worked on a high rise in San Francisco. I bet God came to mind every time he looked down. Another parishioner, Gary, was the safety supervisor for a company that handles explosive chemicals. When he unloaded ships in the middle of the night, he made sure that God showed up for his shift. Then there was Ethan, who once served in the Coast Guard. One of his duties had been retrieving the bodies of suicide victims when they jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. No avoiding God in that job!

Some jobs make it easy. They're so dangerous that they force us to keep close to God. But for most workers in Silicon Valley, the most dangerous part of the job is the drive to work. So how about inviting God along for the commute? For every red light, every stall on the freeway, you have a good chance to pray.

Sounds silly, but if we want to stay centered in this valley, we have to figure out easy ways to connect with God no

matter how over-packed or unhinged our days. We want thinking about God to become routine. We want praying to be as automatic as breathing.

One summer I scooped ice cream in Yellowstone Park. The line was endless. The job was monotonous. I would pass the time by praying: one prayer per scoop. It not only got me through a boring day, but kept me in touch with something more important than jamocha almond fudge.

You may not have a mindless job, but there are still ways for you to practice being mindful every day. You may check your email or social media countless times a day. When you do, why not set aside 30 seconds to pray? You bring a water bottle to work. Every time you take a sip, read a Bible verse and drink in some Living Water. A lot of us take pills every day. So let the pill reminder be a prayer reminder. When you get home from work and want to watch TV, mute the ads. During the commercial break take a prayer break.

If we would just use these little interruptions in our day as opportunities to breathe deep and pray, if we could just connect these routine actions with little mini contemplations, then we could be sitting at Jesus' feet more or less all day every day. As your fall schedule gets under way, try one of these suggestions for a week and see how much more mindful you can be. I'm willing to bet that you will find that it will be much easier to feel Mary's heart while you work with Martha's hands.

These two sisters are, in fact, inseparable. Just as hands and hearts are two vital parts of one body, action and contemplation are two necessary modes of one Christian life. So Martha can't live without Mary or she'll just have attitude without beatitude. But Mary can't live without Martha, either. As she will soon discover, by choosing Jesus, she may think she is choosing a life of contemplation, but it is a contemplation that is only ever fulfilled in action.

The bottom line for Christians is that we need both sisters in order to follow Jesus. So as we serve with Martha's hands, let's pray that God will give us Mary's heart. For only when we get these two sisters together, our hand and our heart, can we be sure that we have chosen the better part.