

I never conclude a sermon with the words, "To be continued," but I could have last week. If you were here last week you may remember we had the gospel reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan. This Sunday our gospel reading picks up with the very next verse, which is the story of Martha and Mary. These two accounts are right next to each other in Luke's gospel and they go hand in hand.

At first they seem to contradict one another. You'll remember that the thing that Jesus commends the Samaritan for the most is his hospitality to the beaten Jewish man. The Samaritan goes out of his way to care for him. That goes toward the point of the parable, which is that everyone is your neighbor, including your enemies.

But now Jesus appears to be criticizing Martha for being about the tasks of hospitality. On the surface I don't like this teaching. I like to have things neat and orderly. When someone comes to visit I want the house to look its best. Even if it is really a big messy pit most of the time I want to give

visitors the impression that there is some measure of order and civilization under my roof. Is Jesus giving the slobs of the world the green light to their slovenly habits?

But this story isn't really about a clean house and a well cooked meal for visitors. It is about being distracted from what is truly important.

A very interesting thing happens in this little scene, one that we most certainly miss. Martha is so worked up about the rules of hospitality that she breaks them herself. Look at what she does. She is so worked up about Mary leaving all the "important" tasks going undone that she turns to Jesus and says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." That statement is way out of bounds. She's criticizing and attempting to embarrass her sister in front of guests. She's also asking a guest to intercede on a matter that really has nothing to do with him. And, she accuses Jesus of not caring about her - another thing you never do to a guest.

If you are a fan of the British TV comedy *Keeping Up Appearances* you know the main character, Hyacinth Bucket; but as she requires it to be pronounced, "Hyacinth Bouquet". Hyacinth is always distracted by keeping up the appearance that she is a person of high fashion and society, that she is important, that she is an impeccable hostess. And in her constant attempts to create this appearance she breaks just about every rule of hospitality there is.

I'm not suggesting that Hyacinth Bucket is a model for what Martha is like, but if you know the show that's probably the way Martha was distracted.

Sorry to all of you messy housekeepers who love this passage because it appears to give divine sanction to a messy house. It's not about that at all. It's about distraction. Martha is distracted. Mary is not.

Perhaps a parallel to our lives is something I've picked on in sermons before - the too busy lives many people lead. It's summer time and both of my kids have finished spring baseball/softball seasons. Right now they're not doing anything

other than enjoying a summer break. Sports and music and drama and scouting will all begin again when school starts. But at my kids last ball games of the season I heard any number of parents talking about what their kids are doing next: more sports, sports camps, drama camps, summer music programs, etc. When they asked me what my kids were doing I said they're not doing anything. Other than Confirmation Camp for one and Cub Scout camp for the other, they are taking a break - summer holidays. And any number of times I got looks which suggested, "You're a careless and lazy parent who is neglecting his children."

In Jesus' day the issue was hospitality. In our day today the issue is having well prepared and well-rounded children and giving them every opportunity to develop. Or it is appearing successful with a high standard of living. Or it is appearing prosperous or having "made it." It is being up to speed with the latest electronic communication devices.

Pastor Elisabeth Johnson, from the Lutheran Institute of Theology at Meiganga, Cameroon, notes this:

"In a culture of hectic schedules and the relentless pursuit of productivity, we are tempted to measure our worth by how busy we

are, by how much we accomplish, or by how well we meet the expectations of others...

"Many people in our congregations likely identify with Martha. Feeling pulled in different directions, feeling worried and distracted by many things -- these seem to be common threads of life in our fast-paced world. And yet, as Jesus says in Luke 12:25, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" We know that worrying does no good, and that much of what we worry about is not so important in the larger scheme of things, and yet we cannot seem to quell our anxious thoughts and frantic activity.

"It is true that much of our busyness and distraction stems from the noblest of intentions. We want to provide for our families, we want to give our children every opportunity to enrich their lives, we want to serve our neighbors, and yes, we want to serve the Lord. Indeed, where would the church be without its "Marthas," those faithful folk who perform the tasks of hospitality and service so vital to making the church a welcoming and well-functioning community?

And yet if all our activities leave us with no time to be still in the Lord's presence and hear God's word, we are likely to end up anxious and troubled. We are likely to end up with a kind of service that is devoid of love and joy and is resentful of others. (From Workingpreacher.org)

There's plenty of things in this world to be worried about. Faith is not one of them. God knows you. God loves you. God cares for you. And with that kind of security you are set free from the other cares and concerns of the world.

May you be like Mary - not limited or controlled by the conventions of culture that oppress you - but freed by the Lord to know joy, love, and wholeness. And then from that joy, love,

and wholeness be able to live and serve with a contented heart
that is nourished always by God's grace. Amen