

This Overwhelming Work
Psalm 52 Luke 10:38-42
July 21, 2019

There is always so much to be done! Whether we are at work and trying to manage the myriad details of running a business or a classroom, or at home and attempting to stay on top of meal preparation, yard work and laundry. The details of life can be overwhelming. Of course, some days are better than others in terms of how “on top of things” we feel. It depends on whether we are being interrupted by phone calls or crises that have to be dealt with, or if we are able to move freely from one item to another on our “to do” list, ending our day with a sense of accomplishment.

In our scripture reading today, Jesus has arrived at Martha’s home for a visit. Some say that Mary and Martha together led an early Christian community, a house church or worship group of some sort. It is impressive all on its own that Martha welcomed Jesus into *her* house, because women in that time period simply did not have homes of their own. Women were not allowed to own any kind of property at all, and so this situation is very unusual from the first sentence.

It is clear that Martha and Mary are not ordinary women of their time. It is also apparent that they have a lot on their plates, and while Mary takes the time to sit down and listen to Jesus for awhile, perhaps to pray with him and talk about deep theological issues, Martha keeps right on working. Usually when we read this story in Luke about Mary and Martha, we are told that Martha is busy doing housework, preparing dinner for the disciples or cleaning up after a large meal. But the interesting thing is that the word used to describe what she is doing, “*diakonian*”, actually means work of a far different nature than housework. In her book, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, Bonnie Thurston explains this passage in a way that offers new insight for many of us. In verse 40 of today’s passage, we are told that Martha, “*was distracted by her many tasks, ‘literally’ by much serving.*” *Again, the Greek word is diakonian, which in Luke is used more in the context of “activity of an in-between kind,” “spokesperson,” than of “waiting tables.” Diakonia in Luke-Acts. . . denotes participation with others in leadership and ministry on behalf of the community.*” The word appears in Acts eight times, and in six of those instances it points to leadership in the church and preaching the Gospel.

The many distracting tasks that kept Martha from sitting down and listening to Jesus talk may not have been meal preparation or clean up, but rather, the overwhelming work of her ministry among the people in the early church. The word diakonia is also the root of the word for the ecclesiastical office of “deacon” both in the early church and in many Christian churches of today. So, perhaps there is opportunity here to cast this story in a completely new light.

I have just started as pastor of the Rutland UMC, but I have been a pastor for over 35 years, and I know firsthand that the work of ministry can be overwhelming. There are always so many more things that need to be done than anyone can possibly manage to do. There are jokes within churches acknowledging that not even Jesus could possibly do everything that needs to be done when faced with all of the demands. Even with a wonderful team effort, such as I am finding here at Rutland, and in the caring circle at Wildwood, we go home each day knowing there are people who are still hurting, whether because they need some basic services such as a safe place to stay or medical care or nutritious food, or whether they need someone to pray with them and offer encouragement as they face the challenges of life. In this life of faith and the overwhelming work to which God calls us, it is easy to get caught up in meeting people’s needs. It is easy, unfortunately, to lose sight of what is truly

important. There are plenty of times that I have done this, and I am sure that I am not the only one. When someone is hurting, I want to be there for them. I want to stand by their side and give them all the support they need. But if I don't also take time for my own spiritual nourishment, then I am not able to do as good a job of this as I would like. Taking time for one's own spiritual life is important. This, of course looks different for each of us. Some of us like to read the Bible each morning and journal about the insights that come to us, others of us like to take time to walk outside and soak in God's abundant presence in the natural world, and still others of us like to pray for our loved ones and ourselves before we do anything else. Feeding ourselves spiritually, is vital to our own well being, but it is also crucial if we are to do the overwhelming work of ministry, of caring for the world and its inhabitants on God's behalf, that is in front of us.

Mary took time to sit with Jesus and listen to him. At this point in Jesus' own life, he had already "set his sight toward Jerusalem", which means he was already intending to go to Jerusalem where his enemies were waiting. He knew that they wanted to get rid of him, and that he would most likely be killed, and so this was probably his last visit with Martha and Mary. It was their last chance to gain his wisdom and guidance, to listen to his insights about God and the life of faith. The other details of their ministry, the ones that Martha was most likely taking care of while Mary sat at Jesus' feet, would certainly be there after Jesus had left. In fact, once Jesus went to Jerusalem, and if he was put to death, then people in their community of faith were going to need a whole lot of support as they wrestled with the challenges that were to come. It was important for Martha and Mary to gain as much support from Jesus now, while they could, so that they could do the work that was to come.

I don't think Jesus was saying that the tasks Martha was doing were not important, but I do think he was trying to help both she and her sister understand that there are appropriate times for every task. If we can sort out what needs to be done and when is the best time to do it, then we will be able to maintain a balance in our lives that enables us to be as effective as possible in accomplishing the work of ministry that is ours to do. And, just as each of us is spiritually nourished by different things, we also are each suited to different forms of ministry. When we find the work that brings our souls alive, then the work is more easily done. In fact, it often doesn't even feel like work. The challenge for each of us is to figure out what we need in order to stay spiritually nourished as well as how we can best express our faith out in the world so as to bring God's love, compassion and healing alive. If we can find this balance as individuals and as communities of faith, then this overwhelming work to which God has called us will not feel so overwhelming.

God of love and compassion, we want to show your love and bring your healing to this hurting world, and yet we often don't slow down long enough to let your love soak into our own hearts and lives. Slow us down, God, and fill us up. Guide us into taking time to pray, to reflect, to simply be present in your love and compassion every day. Hold us in your presence, God, so that our faith might be nourished. May we do your work from the abundance of love and light, of insight and encouragement, from the strength you give to us. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.