

## “Great Expectations”

Luke 10:38-42

July 17, 2016

Several years ago Pastor Norm and I were discussing the story of Mary and Martha. The question was: Which sister did the “right” thing? Norm confidently concluded that Mary had made the wiser choice, for wouldn’t we all want to take advantage of being able to spend one-on-one time at Jesus’ feet, and learn from him? I had to agree; but I also understood the complexities of preparing for a dinner party!

A few months later, our church was host to a joint meeting between Santa Fe and Sierra Blanca Presbyteries. The meeting was charged with big political decisions regarding our future; whether we should join as one presbytery, or remain separate. Santa Fe Presbytery was bringing a Greyhound bus along with many cars and vans, and we expected a large attendance. Our whole church was involved in the preparation!

We gathered registrars and greeters; we planned hospitality, meals, snacks, and after-dinner entertainment; and preachers and musicians for two worship services, all to be accomplished between Friday afternoon and lunch on Saturday.

The day of the meeting, this church was buzzing with activity I was in the office helping with last-minute details, and suddenly Norm rushed in with a frantic, preoccupied look on his face. He took a fresh water bottle in his hand, opened it, and turning it upside down, drained it in one huge gulp! He hadn’t even had time to drink water!

As he finished and heaved a sigh, I couldn’t help but ask, “What do you think of Mary and Martha now?” He burst into laughter as he realized that being the host had suddenly become overwhelming -- and he was now in Martha’s shoes!

Martha has joyfully invited Jesus to her home. Jesus is a close friend of the family, and she knows well the importance of Jesus’ ministry and his influence among the people. Like any of us would be, she is honored that he will share in a meal that she has prepared, and she sets out to make it one he will remember! Pots and pans begin flying in the kitchen; vegetables are gathered; bread is made the table needs to be set I’m sure you can imagine!

And then, there is Mary: perfectly content, gazing quietly into Jesus’ face as he talks with her, perhaps telling her about his ministry and mission to the Gentiles, the lowly and the outcasts. Mary is in heaven! Meanwhile, Martha is sweating in the hot kitchen. I must confess, I feel

Martha's frustration! For if Jesus ever came to dinner at my house, I am sure I would want to be the best hostess he had ever encountered! The self-expectations would be very great! But Jesus reminds Martha that to strive for perfection detracts from what is most important – the honored guest.

Seeking perfection can become a distracted purpose that is centered on a selfish desire to “outdo oneself” for the guest. Jesus does not expect or require this. This story is told after Jesus has commissioned the 72 disciples to become apostles in his name. Jesus gives the new apostles a lesson in manners for their home visits as they travel to new communities and to those who may not have heard the good news, or who do not want to hear it.

These days are not always easy for Christians! They are singing a New Song in Strange Lands. The apostles are told to assess their level of welcome in the community, to be sure that the villagers are friendly. They are not to be an imposition on their hosts, and are to accept the meals that are offered, without judgment of the cook. Jesus tells them, “Eat what they set before you.” From his directions we learn that Jesus doesn't expect elaborate meals.

Although many women in the OT were deemed worthy of respect, the rabbinic culture of the NT had changed women's status to a clearly inferior one. To counter this, Jesus deliberately shapes his teachings in order to communicate his message just as powerfully to women as to men. Jesus elevates and affirms the status of women as his disciples. Mary is therefore just as welcome as a man to sit with Jesus and hear his teaching.

Martha leaves Jesus and goes into the kitchen to prepare the meal; she begins flipping through her recipes, chopping the vegetables, sorting the beans, and heating water in her pots. As she realizes that Mary isn't coming into the kitchen to help, but instead is sitting next to Jesus in rapt attention, she probably begins banging the pots more loudly and finally turns to Jesus to complain about Mary's lack of help. Jesus' words, “Martha, Martha!” indicate that she is overdoing her efforts as hostess and that he would gratefully accept a simple, one-course meal. It is evident that Jesus is more interested in serving others than he is in being served.

Even though Martha's efforts are to be praised, they are not faultless. Martha believes she is doing the better thing, so she criticizes her sister.

In the cultural context of biblical Palestine, she may even believe that Mary has no place as a disciple, that it would be a disgrace to the family if Mary decided to follow Jesus along with the men. Since Martha is determined to stop Mary's moment with Jesus, she places her honored

guest in the very middle of the squabble by asking him to reprimand Mary. Jesus gently reprimands Martha instead.

But Jesus makes it plain: Only ONE THING is necessary: **to honor the guest, and listen**. The rest is optional. Martha has neglected the most important aspect of dinner with Jesus: **his presence**. Jesus does not mean that apart from this one thing all else is unimportant, but that we are to keep things prudently in order, lest the more trivial thing comes to dominate.

Mary recognizes the **importance of the guest**; Martha's mind is governed by a tradition of **service to the guest**. But her ultimate failure is in her unwillingness to serve her sister along with Jesus. In these two sisters, Jesus juxtaposes the traditional role of women that of supporter of Jesus and his disciples, and an emerging non-traditional role that of disciple.

A meal had great historical and symbolic importance in the biblical world. Meals conveyed a "language" of rich meaning and communication.

Food functioned as a metaphor for the Word of God:

- To feed was to bless, to confer life;
- To feed bad food was to judge or punish, or confer death.
- To eat together joined people with the Lord in unity, covenant, and belonging.

This association of God's Word as the Bread of Life is a thread that runs throughout both Old and New Testaments. For instance:

- Moses explained to his people in the wilderness that "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." -- and
- When the prophet, Amos, spoke of famine, he was speaking not of bread or water, but of the Words of the LORD. Also,
- Jesus, as he is tempted in the wilderness, reminds Satan: "It is written, one does not live by bread alone."

Because these traditions are imbedded in the Judean culture, Martha knows the meaning of the meal she will prepare for Jesus. She is filled with great expectations of herself: to create a meal that symbolizes her devotion to God, who has provided the food.

She is also expecting Mary to assist her.

When Jesus tells Martha, "Mary has chosen the better part," he is referring to his teaching. Mary knows she will not get this opportunity every day, so she chooses the "good portion" -- the "main course" of the meal -- to be fed the Word of Life -- and Jesus will not deprive her.

Many of you may have the same problem as I in your daily living; the distractions are endless when it comes to “having time” to rest in the Lord. Reality trumps the dream of having all the time in the world available for reading and reflection. It is up to us, though, to order our lives so that we save the time and a quiet place in our life for God. Time spent is the only element that can bring us together with God.

In our contemporary lives we can easily underestimate the blessings of the Constant Presence that sustains us. We consume our physical bread and ignore the spiritual bread that awaits us each and every day.

Jesus is not pitting sister against sister or telling Martha that her work is less important. He is saying that to be caught up in fussy details can take time away from the important things in life. Martha is exhausting herself in the details.

When our granddaughter Molly was 3 or 4 years old, she loved to bake cookies with me. One day she came, with her favorite cookie cutters, an apron, and her child-size broom, and announced: “Today I am going to bake cookies, wash the dishes, and sweep the floor – and then, I’m going to be exhausted!”

The word “exhausted” from a preschooler’s mouth startled me, for I knew very well where she had heard it, many times before -- from my own mouth!

I suddenly realized that at the end of large family dinners or a day outside with the children, my comment to them often would be, “I need to rest! I am exhausted!”

Baking cookies with grandchildren does not qualify as a needless activity, for it is precious time that strengthens family ties and memories: and this is the good part that cannot be taken away.

It reminds us of the fact that when we gather around food, we are thankful: for the social aspect of enjoying one another, working together to produce something good to eat, and satisfaction in accomplishing it.

When we think on the good things that happen during such a time, we can let go and enjoy the moment.

No matter what our job may be in society, we hope to keep our focus on Christ. We do not fret about things that are beyond our control; for we can only control our actions.

We partake of the Word and our minds stay on the good portion that has been offered to us –

And, renewed in mind and spirit, what we **do** flows naturally from who we **are**.

In the church, there are many unique tasks, and it is important how we treat one another as we work together. All our tasks work toward the same goal: to know, love, and serve Christ; and along the way, we learn to serve each other, without regard to who is serving whom. We serve indiscriminately, for our willingness to serve each other is to know, love and serve Christ.

In the church, Our hope and Greatest Expectation is that Christ will come to this house each time we are gathered, to impart a gracious meal of the richest kind; and we who have gazed into his face and learned from him will go forth in his name to share it.

Christ provides the focus and keeps us from succumbing to a life filled with no real purpose other than making ourselves happy.

How boring and unrewarding that would be!

In this story, Christ bids Martha - and all of us - to reconsider our lives, to find the “good portion” and discard the fretting that threatens to take its place. Instead of pressuring ourselves with expectations, we are encouraged to stop and attend to the Word of Life. It is in hearing Jesus’ word that we learn who Jesus is, and then begin to understand who we are.

Any Great Expectations we have for ourselves are selfishly made, and turn us inward. Opening ourselves to the gracious expectations that God has for us will free us to a new world of joy and commitment to others. Our lives will then be truly fulfilled, beyond our imagining. We can trust that God will do this!

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and in your presence, let us rest. Amen.