

Life is So Much More Than That 2022
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11 Luke 10:38-42

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11 (New Revised Standard Version)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. ¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Luke 10:38-42 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Connie was a good friend and part of my study group during seminary.

She was looking a bit weary and frazzled one time,
so I asked if she was OK, and what was going on.

She explained that her mother-in-law was coming for a visit,
so she had been getting ready by deep-cleaning everything.
But then she woke up at 2:30 AM that morning and suddenly realized
she'd forgotten to dust and clean the ceiling fan blades,
and the crown moldings around their 14 foot high ceiling...
... and had worn herself out trying to correct that oversight.

The next morning when her husband David got up,
he pointed out that his mother stands less than 5 feet tall,
and very unlikely to climb a ladder checking for ceiling-dust.

But for Connie,
anything less than perfection, meant that she was a failure.

When my mother was still alive,
she loved it when the family came together during the holidays.
Her focus was always preparing an amazing meal for the family,
and getting an infinite array of details exactly just right...
...it was her significant way of expressing her love for all of us.

Of course that wonderful meal together did enhance our gathering,
but really it was the rich conversation, the laughter and stories,
all the relational stuff of being family and friends,
was really **what mattered the most.**

sharing time together

It's easy to get lost in the details of the doing and accomplishing,

to get distracted and lose our focus on what is truly important,
and allow the true blessing and gift to slip right past us.

The Luke passage today can be a challenging and uncomfortable text,
disturbing for many dedicated, busy & hard-working church folks.

Like the Good Samaritan story that immediately proceeds it,
the action & plot are simple enough to grasp & understand.

These two passages from Luke are connected like companion stories.

Both in answer to the lawyer's 1st question of the Samaritan story,
"what does God really want and desire from me?"

In this section of Luke Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem,
where he will suffer and die to save sinners,
to be raised from the dead, ascend to the Father,
and leave the disciples to build the Church...
... which exists to serve and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The focus and purpose along this final journey to Jerusalem
is to teach, equip and prepare the disciples
to become the Church, the living body of Christ.

In our text, Jesus & his followers are spending time at Martha's home,
and consistent with hospitality expectations of their culture,
Martha is busy preparing plans and arrangements for her guests.

Imagine Martha's joy and delight when Jesus accepted her invitation,
to dine, relax and to spend time, with her family, in their home...
... and no doubt
she wanted everything to turn out perfect and please him.
Martha recognized that there was more to be done
than just sitting on a mountaintop singing Kum ba Ya.

The truth is, I've got quite a bit of Martha in me.
I like to see things done well with close attention to detail.

We Martha-type Christians like to get it right, whatever we are doing.

We prefer to exercise considerable control, direction & influence,
and just love it when things work out well, as planned & arranged,
& feel strangely validated when we're busy with heavy demands,
since anything less than total success feels like a loss and failure.

And so sometimes we Martha-Christians can get a little carried away,
as we frantically try to achieve and control every detail.
We can be **so** busy and preoccupied with accomplishing tasks
that we may miss or dismiss an opportunity for fellowship.

In the passage we read, Martha was stressed, frustrated and anxious,
somewhat upset that all was not unfolding the way she had planned,
and in her rushed weariness and pressure for perfection,
there wasn't time just to sit with Jesus and listen.

I have lived that same scene as a Martha many times over the years.
Working hard, feverishly, feeling frustrated and getting angry
when someone doesn't share my sense of urgency and achievement.

Finally, Martha has had enough of all that and explodes, vs. 40

But Martha was distracted by her many tasks... "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

The specific Greek words used suggest some fascinating contrasts:

Mary is sitting at the Lord's feet,
and Martha is literally standing over Jesus.

Mary is listening to Jesus, and Martha is speaking at Jesus.
Mary is being attentive to what Jesus is saying to do,
and Martha presumes to tell Jesus what he should do.

And a large part of Martha's problem is, it's upsetting to realize
that Mary is not buying into her busy agenda of work to be done,
because Mary won't sacrifice her time to spend with Jesus.

She isn't busy working, **but is honoring Jesus as a guest by listening.**

In fact, by sitting at his feet with **her undivided attention**,
she's really offering the very best of **authentic hospitality.**

As the story continues, vs. 41-42

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and **distracted by many things**; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The Greek word for distracted, means being pulled in many directions.
Jesus is saying all that work, it's not all needed or necessary,
and Mary has chosen well, which will not be taken away from her.

We can be so intent on duty & tasks being executed exactly as planned,
that friendship, patience & gentleness get tragically overlooked...
... which is, basically to miss a very important point.

But in reading this text, I don't hear any harshness toward Martha.
Instead I hear, in a gentle, concerned and loving voice,
"Martha, Martha, look at what you are doing to yourself.
This isn't what I want, need, desire or intend for you,
for you matter to me far more than all that you're try to accomplish.

I believe that Jesus was trying to release and liberate Martha
from the heavy burden of her obsessive sense of duty and task,
so she can stop, **relax and know the joy of a friendship.**
Jesus isn't condemning Martha. He's inviting her to join the party
instead of focusing on the tasks distracting and worrying her.

Both sisters loved Jesus, and were his faithful friends & disciples.
Both of them wanted to honor Jesus by giving him their very best,
and Jesus loved and appreciated both of these women.
These 2 sisters demonstrated the effects of grace in different ways.

Historically,

I think that the church has come down a little too hard on Martha,
and often misunderstood the point that Jesus was making...

... it is not that quiet contemplation is godlier & more faithful
than actively serving others & trying to make a difference,
It's a call for balance in our life of Christian discipleship,
for both activism & reflection to support & complement each other.

Back when I studied microbiology in college,

there was a lecture 3 days a week and a weekly laboratory section,
and a student had to do both lecture and lab to pass the course.
We needed the lecture to understand what we were doing in the lab,
and our lab work was to help connect what we heard in the lectures.

In microbiology, it wasn't do one or the other, but we needed both.

So too discipleship is both activity and reflection in balance.

In truth, each one enables, guides, supports & conforms the other,
and our struggle as Christians is to maintain that **balance**
between our listening contemplation and active service.

I don't think that the point is that work and effort aren't spiritual,
or that listening contemplation and prayerful meditation
are somehow better or preclude active Christian service.

The Martha – Mary contrast is not between the doing and the spiritual,
or that we should **not** make careful plans, work hard, serve,
or that our very best efforts are somehow **not** appropriate.

I am quite certain
that not this church nor any other church could operate for long
if there were not at least a few Martha's faithfully serving among us.

Where Martha got it wrong was not in working hard to serve
or in trying to accomplish and offer to Jesus very her best,
but it was that **her attitude and motivation,**
had become fixated on self, rather than on Christ,
judging someone else's efforts against her own.

This passage, along with the parable of the Good Samaritan,
which is a call to an active faith that tries to do something,
are really calls for balance, and not one better than the other.

Our Christian service and our faithful work of ministry,
must emerge from our relationship and walk with Christ,
otherwise it does not honor God, and will eventually and gradually
devolve into a destructive focus on self, works and performance.

This passage reminds us
that we can be so busy doing, even doing good and needed things,
that the joy of our walk with God slides into distant neglect.

When I deal with the weeds in my garden, I pull them & shake the soil,
which cuts off their water & nutrition, so they wither away and die.

In a similar way, our faith needs constant & consistent nourishment.
The good and useful service we do must be inspired and guided
by our continuing and growing intimate walk of faith with God,
or spiritually, we wither, even while doing good things.

After decades of working with deacons, elders and others in service,
almost every time I've observed any one of them
burning out or dropping out, becoming cynical or embittered,

they had been trying to serve and accomplish their ministry
from their own strength, abilities, understanding & experience...
... neglecting the promise, power and Holy Spirit present
to perfectly accomplish what we cannot do on our own.

Trying to accomplish Christian service without **also feeding our soul**
is like running an engine hard without any oil,
which will eventually burn out or throw a rod.
As surely as operating an engine without oil will destroy it,
so too, we'll damage our faith and Christian connection.

In the Good Samaritan story,
in the end, Jesus pointedly commands, "*Go and do likewise*".
That is an obvious call to action, active mercy and compassion,
to usefulness, effectiveness and Christian service **like Martha**.

This text also calls us to sit the feet of Jesus, and listen **like Mary**
and to suspend our busy activities in order to nurture our souls,
to pause and let God's gracious love speak into our relationship.

There is an appropriate time to, "*GO and DO likewise*"
and there is also an appropriate time,
for sitting at the Lord's feet, and listen for what Jesus is saying.

Wisdom is doing the right thing, at the right time, as in Eccl. vs. 1, 11
For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. **He has made
everything suitable for its time.**

There is a time to go & do, and there is a time to listen & reflect.
Christian discipleship is much more than just doing the right things.
It's not that Martha is doing something evil or wrong,
she was working hard trying to serve her Lord Jesus.
Her problem was, she's too distracted to enjoy just being with Jesus.

Martha's work was commendable, her attitude & anxiety were not.
**Our Christian service, the good that we do and accomplish for God,
must always be rooted and nourished by our relationship with Jesus.**

Our good deeds and activities must be empowered, inspired and guided,
by a consistent, growing and intimate walk while listening to God,
or even our good deeds will become tainted
by a self-serving attitude and motivation,
by a self-righteous resentment of others.

**That is where Martha got it wrong, and where Mary got it right,
& didn't allow anyone or anything to confuse her priorities.**

As Jesus explains later on in Luke 12:29-31,

And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and **do not keep worrying**. For
it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.
Instead, **strive for his kingdom**, and these things will be given to you as well.