

Distractions

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, July 18, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God, it is your word that seeks to shape our lives and create within us your divine image. We pray today that as we gather around your word, as your word is proclaimed in so many different forms throughout our worship service. That you will indeed shape us take; those parts of us that keep us separate from you and help them to disappear and be transformed that we might be drawn closer to you and might live more fully the life you so desire for us. This prayer I offer in the name of your son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon:

The reading from Amos today is a tough reading because it basically says that God has reached the end of his rope with Israel. He's given up on them, their constant turning back to him only to then to forget about God. And God's patience has worn thin. It's a very sad reading for Israel. It's a very sad reading for us because we can point our fingers at the Children of Israel as we read the Old Testament. And I know we were doing that in our Disciple class this past year studying the Old Testament, just saying, "When are they ever going to get it right?" Only to realize that we suffer from the same condition, the human condition, that when things fall apart, we quickly turn to God and ask God, "Why have you done this to us?" And when things are going great we forget all about God. And so it's a very difficult lesson to read, and one that I'm choosing not to preach on today.

But then we have this reading from the Gospel that for many of us is problematic. Because it does seem that Martha gets the short end of the stick in this story. And anyone who has walked in Martha's shoes has very strong feelings about this reading.

Have you ever hosted a special celebration? Maybe it was a party, a birthday party; maybe it was a special anniversary for someone in the family. Maybe it was a graduation or an engagement party; maybe it was just that some family you haven't seen for a long time

or some friends you've lost touch with finally came to town and you just wanted to do something special for them.

If you've ever hosted such an occasion you know that there are many details to which to attend: there's food to buy; there's a house to clean; there are decorations to arrange; silver to polish – sometimes we do bring out the good dinnerware; there's linens to press and to put in order on the table; there's fine china to set out. Then there is the food preparation that sometimes take days especially for a very special occasion and a very big occasion; there are guests to invite and guests to greet and guests to serve; there are glasses to be filled and empty plates to be replenished; there's that special touch of dessert and coffee to be brewed. And just when you thought it was over there are dirty dishes to be scraped and cleared and washed; and there're leftovers to be stored in those little tubs that we have in our cabinets at home; there are farewells and genuine expressions of gratitude for your hospitality.

The task of hosting such an occasion is no light matter. And the person who takes such a role seriously has little, if any, time to join in the festivities. Just like Martha in today's reading from the Gospel, there are so many things to do that being a host allows little time if any for joining in the conversation.

If you have ever been a host at a special occasion, after the guests have gone, you've probably had mixed feelings – a feeling of satisfaction for having given your best to make your guests feel comfortable and appreciated and special. But you may also have come to the end of the party feeling like you missed something. You only heard part of a joke and you never heard the punch line. You only heard half of the story and you didn't know how that story began. You didn't have the time to truly interact with your guests to get caught up with their lives and to share your own life with them. You only have bits and pieces of conversations and so while there's a sense of satisfaction, a feeling of satisfaction, that you've done the best you have to offer and you feel good about that; there's also a feeling sometimes that you've missed out. You didn't get the full experience.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is traveling along the road and he stops in Bethany, and Bethany is just 2 miles to the east of Jerusalem. It's a suburb of Jerusalem. And he stops at the home of Martha and Mary – the sisters of Lazarus, the man who Jesus

raised from the dead. He stops at their home; it doesn't say it was Lazarus' home – it was the home of Martha and Mary.

Jesus and his followers, who are traveling with him, stop in front of the house, and you can be assured Jesus greets Martha and Mary the way he had instructed the 70 that he sent on the mission to spread the word that the Kingdom of God is near, he greeted them in the same way he had instructed his disciples. He said to Martha and Mary, "Peace be with you." And he waited for his peace to come back to him. He waited for Mary and Martha to say to Jesus, "And peace be with you"; the secret code language that it was ok to enter this house of peace; it was safe; it was a safe place, a good place. So Jesus and his followers enter their home and they receive the hospitality of the home.

As Martha looked upon this group that now had gathered in her home, she was one of those people who when she looks at you she sees someone who is thirsty and somebody who's hunger. And she feels the responsibility to do something about that; to care for a traveler's hunger and to slake a traveler's thirst. And so Jesus and his followers, and it was not a small group, upon entering Martha and Mary's home, for Martha, she saw a human need. And we have to remember this was the day before refrigeration; the day before grocery stores and freezers to store up things that we buy along the way at the right price. And so Martha upon looking at this unexpected group immediately begins to think in her mind, "Do I have enough to feed them? Is there enough in my kitchen to take care of their hunger?" Martha's brain just kicks right in, cause it's natural for her, she's starts developing a little list because she knows she's going to need a lot of vegetables; she's going to need water; she's going to need bread; and if she's lucky maybe she'll find some lamb or some goat meat.

And so, Martha right away kicks right into gear and immediately goes outside to her garden to see what is ready to be used for food preparation; and I'm sure that the crowd that had gathered she probably did not have enough in her garden to care for that group. And so you can see her going from neighbors' house to neighbors' house knocking on the kitchen door asking, "Do you have some food to spare? I have special guests with me." You can see Martha hoping to find enough as she goes from door to door, from friend to friend, woman to woman in the village of Bethany, hoping to find enough. And when she finally has enough and she's putting all of this produce – she doesn't have grocery bags, she doesn't have the tote bags that we bring to the grocery store – she's

collecting them in her apron. And she quickly gets back to her house and begins the work of food preparation.

The men were in the other room. Martha was in her kitchen. And she was preparing a special meal for a very special guest. At least a very special rabbi named Jesus. But people were beginning to say that there's something extremely special about this man that perhaps he is the Messiah. And so she's making this vegetable stew; she's putting in all that she can. And if she was lucky, she has some meat to put in that stew. She checks to see how much bread she has, she probably has to borrow some bread from neighbors. Maybe she has to quickly make some bread out of flour and water and quickly bake them in her oven.

Martha didn't have time to worry about decorations or table settings and that was fortunate for in those days you didn't really have table settings. Martha had a big pot that her vegetable stew would've been prepared in. And that pot would've been brought from the kitchen into the center of the room where the men were along with the pita bread that had been baked. And there were no plates; there were no forks or no napkins. The men would simply break off a piece of bread and dip it into the vegetable stew and scoop some up and eat. So, fortunately, Martha did not have to worry about table settings. She didn't have to worry about napkins; and she didn't have to worry about a big clean up afterward. There was just a big pot that needed to be cleaned at the end of this feast.

All the time that this is going on for Martha, imagine if you will, in her thoughts and perhaps even whispered under her breath, "They show up with no warning and expect me to feed all of them. This is going to be impossible. How will I get enough to feed all of these hungry men? They won't even come and help me carry the produce that I do find back to my kitchen. They let me do all the work and they expect to be feed and they expect it to be good. But not one of them lifts a finger to help me, they all sit in there and they listen to Jesus while I'm in here perspiring; while I'm in here trying to pull this all together. Even my lazy sister, Mary, isn't helping me out. She's supposed to be with me. She's supposed to be doing what women do. Instead she's sitting out there with the men making a fool of herself and doing what men do. Why can't she come in here and help me? Why doesn't that Jesus tell her to get in the kitchen? Women do not belong out in this conversation or in this room."

Did you grow up in a home with brothers and sisters? I grew up with a brother. Did you ever have similar thoughts towards your siblings? When it was time for the chores or time to do the dishes after supper or time to cut the grass, did you have someone in your family who was always missing in action – maybe they were in the bathroom – ½ an hour?; oh, or maybe they had to go meet a friend and they couldn't let their friend down; or maybe they were on the phone – you can't interrupt the phone conversation that lasts for an hour. I think some of you; maybe all of you know what I'm talking about. And if you do, you know how Martha felt. You can actually empathize with Martha not just sympathize with her because you have walked in her shoes. And you know how steamed you can get when the brother or the sister, when somebody else who's supposed to be helping out suddenly disappears and leaves the work to you.

Martha wanted Rabbi Jesus, to put Mary, her sister, in her rightful place in their society. She wanted Jesus to tell Mary, "Women belong in the kitchen not sitting out with the men. Women eat after the men have had their fill and they eat in the kitchen, not with the men. And a woman would dare not take a piece of that bread and dip it in the stew pot at the same time men were doing this." Martha wanted Jesus to put Mary in her place, and he wasn't. And so, you can almost sense if you read between the lines, that Martha is like a pressure cooker ready to blow. And she explodes on Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." This was not some little polite sentence spoken to Jesus; it was an outburst of anger and rage.

Any other rabbi in Jesus' time would have told Mary to get busy with her sister and help serve the men their meal. Any other rabbi in Jesus' time would have never allowed Mary to even sit with the men, let alone listen to their conversation and listen to the teaching that the rabbi was offering. Education was for men and men only. The women were to take care of the home and they didn't need education for that. They just needed training and orientation so they knew how to prepare a meal and how to serve a meal; how to keep in their rightful place and their separate place from the men.

Any other rabbi would have insisted that Mary leave the men and join her sister in preparing their meal. And in fact, any other rabbi would not have even begun instruction until Mary left the room to join her sister in that meal. But Jesus was not any other rabbi, he was the Son of God; he was the Word become flesh. He was the message. Jesus had

come to reshape the life of humanity with his teaching, his healing, his presence and his sacrifice on the cross. And so this rabbi sees life differently than the way society was looking at life. And he saw these two sisters with different eyes than the other males of his time.

If you notice in this story, Jesus does not criticize Martha for her hospitality. He does not criticize what she has done in preparing that meal for Jesus and his followers. And, we can actually ground this by looking at Jesus feeding the 5,000 and the miracles that Jesus performed. When Jesus saw human need, he acted; even to feed 5,000 people with just a small amount of food. Jesus knew how important it was for people to eat. And he knew how important it was to provide hospitality for those who were not able to provide for themselves.

It was not Martha's preparation and serving of food that was wrong in this instance, it was the distractions that filled Martha's mind. The worry over whether there would be enough; Martha had done this countless times in her life – the Lord will provide; no need to worry. But the worry became a distraction. The fretting over having to prepare so much food for so many in such a short time; whatever is prepared, whatever is served will be appreciated. There's no need to fret over all of that. The thoughts about her sister Mary and how she wasn't helping and the anger that began to build up in her own soul toward her sister Mary because she was out there listening and not in the kitchen helping.

And finally, and I'm sure it's there, the thoughts that all that she was doing would go unnoticed and unappreciated. See, what was behind her outburst was not just that she wanted Mary in the kitchen with her; she also wanted Jesus and his followers to know the work that she had been doing and she wanted to be appreciated for that. Martha had become so wrapped up, possessed, and distracted with her thoughts that she forgot who it was she was entertaining. And so it was the distractions that Jesus pointed to in Martha's life. And he said, "You're distracted with many things." He even had to say her name twice – "Martha! Martha!" It wasn't, "Martha, Martha." It was, "Martha! Martha!" To call her back to the center; to get her attention; to get her mind off of the distractions and back to what was important – the savior of the world is in your home; the savior of the world and your sister saw it from the moment we entered; she saw it and she was hungry for the food of my teaching that I have come to offer. Martha,

Martha – don't let all of the worry and the fretting and the anger get you to the point where you forget who is here, Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.

For us I believe the message is very clear: all of our actions as followers of Jesus must be directed by our savior. All of our actions must spring from that primary relationship between us and God, and God and us. And as long as that single-minded relationship is in focus, and we don't allow the distractions of life to get in the way of it – all is well. It was the distractions that Jesus criticized in an effort to help Martha enter into a deeper relationship with God.

The moment we forget and become distracted by other thoughts, details and worries, we find ourselves out of sorts and off balance. Mary was allowing the living Word of God to shape her life and for Mary there was peace. Martha had become so distracted with her thoughts of worry, anxiety and anger that she was lost for a moment. Distractions can do that to us. It can be a simple thing like getting a phone call in the middle of preparing a meal and forgetting to put a key ingredient into the recipe or it can be something life-threatening like text-messaging while you're driving. Distractions are all around us. Jesus calls us to have a singleness of mind; and that singleness of mind is our eyes upon God and allowing that relationship where God is seeking to reshape and transform our lives to be what moves us to action. Will you allow Jesus, the living Word of God, to be your focus so that all that follows might be peace even in the midst of chaos and confusion and distraction?

Thanks be to God, Amen.