

Back in the summer of '97, 20 years ago, Richard and I were co-pastoring Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Our children were eight, six, four, and almost one. Richard was fully sharing the parenting role. He was staying home with kids, picking up from preschool, and cooking. His repertoire in the kitchen was a little limited, but he was amazing in the grocery store with four children, getting everything on the list, something that I could never handle. You would think I'd be a mother and wife full of gratitude, right? But I remember some evenings around six-thirty when I was the one at home and full-blown irritation would start to slowly rise. We had rushed from piano lessons and soccer, and Richard was still at church, still working when he said he would be home. As the children's grumpiness rose in the challenging hours of 5-7 pm, so did mine. I was holding out for the sacred family dinner, doling out cheese slices to keep the wee ones happy. By the time he got home on those hard nights, we did share a meal together, but it was not an especially pleasant time.

I was being Martha, worrying over many things and feeling angry because I was the ones dealing with the cranky kids that day. But before we call Richard "Mary" and say that he was sitting at Jesus' feet out at the church office, the truth is, he was also being Martha, consuming himself with many distracting tasks at church. Wherever we are, and especially when we are feeling burdened by tasks, it is easy to turn into ungrateful, griping Martha, the one unable to rejoice and be glad that Jesus is in the house. He's in the house – every house, and especially this house, the house of God. Hear the story:

Luke 10:38 – 11:13

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

11:1 He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." ⁵ And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷ And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (NRS)

Mary and Martha were each engaged in the task of hospitality. Martha had extended the invitation and was the one scurrying around. We always assume she was in the kitchen preparing food, but she may have been doing other tasks, perhaps the goat needed milking and bedding was needed. Was Jesus staying the night? Mary was the one listening to the special guest. She was doing what was more common for the men of that day. Perhaps that is why her sister complained.

But Jesus' response shows that he encouraged women to break out of their role as solely servants to be full participants in the conversations about life.

Being hospitable to a guest does require both preparations and personal attention. When Richard and I have company, I am usually the one preparing most of the food, but he serves drinks, finds appropriate dinner music, makes coffee and serves desserts. He usually cleans up the kitchen. So the busy-work is shared so both of us have time for the important work of engaging the guest in conversation.

But what about when the work is not shared? Today's women spend more time in paid employment but still come home to the second shift. On average, women spend three more hours doing household chores than men. There are all kinds of cultural expectations that affect this, but it is also why many women have Martha attitudes – grumbling about what the husband or the rest of the family is not doing. Sometimes these inequities have to be carefully discussed so they can be better shared. It's best not to try to have those discussions when a guest is present, Martha. Other times, Martha must work on having a more cheerful spirit of service.

But this tension around whose doing what doesn't just happen in families. In churches there are usually a smaller group of volunteers working very hard to keep the church going. In some churches, only 20% are taking any responsibility beyond showing up for worship or doing the occasional service activity. But not at Peace. We have always been pleased to see that we have almost the opposite – 80% of the people are involved. We promote the concept of worship plus 2 to remind everyone that sitting at Jesus' feet in worship is great but we need lots of people involved in ministry teams and small groups and music groups and task groups to make the church strong and vibrant. And here's the thing: if you find the right two things for you, you yourself will be more content with your church life, because you feel more connected. Whatever we invest our time and energy to do begins to hold more interest for us.

When I first joined the Beth-El Board, I went to meetings, occasionally missing them when I was really busy. I cared about Beth-El, but I wasn't sure what my role was. But as I continued to participate, I discovered where my gifts met the real needs of Beth-El. And in this recent time of crisis, pastoral attention was needed, and also someone to chair the search for a new pastor. So by persisting in involvement, I eventually found where I could be useful. And now, while I have to make sure Beth-El does not take too much of my time, I am enjoying my service on the board more. It is a joy to feel like I am making a difference there.

Yet I've also experienced times in church work, when burdened with a task, and feeling ungrateful for the others around me, as Martha did. She had flesh and blood Jesus in her house, and she was complaining! She was complaining to him that Mary was not helping her. But you know, Mary might have been a terrible cook. Preparing food was not her thing. I don't think Jesus was saying that Mary's form of hospitality (listening) was more valuable than Martha's but Mary's attitude was definitely better. Martha was fretting so much that it got in the way of appreciating both Jesus and Mary. I bet it would have gone much better if Martha had asked Mary kindly for some help, and then simply traded places with her. All of us need a little time to simply sit and listen, enjoy the sacred guest in our midst, worship the Lord. And all of us need to do our part, sharing time and talent to make the burden lighter for others. Maybe Mary was quite happy to do her part, but she was waiting for the moment to trade places with Martha. Or perhaps Martha was making too big a deal about the details. If Martha was too controlling, Mary may have stopped going in to offer assistance.

But notice what follows this story. It is a section on prayer and on persistence and trusting that you will get what you need. When we get obsessed with Martha details and worry about what others are NOT doing to help us, then we have forgotten that with God, there will always be enough. There are enough people to get the work done. There is enough money to supply the need. There is enough time to accomplish what is really crucial. Martha started operating out of an attitude of scarcity. I am not getting enough help from Mary. And the scripture which follows says, "persist in asking, in knocking, in seeking" and you will have what you need.

Turn your frustration into something productive. Don't stew in anger. Communicate your needs to God and others. Trust that God will provide.

Serving God in your church, sharing your time and talent, should bring some joy and satisfaction – whether you are recording offerings and preparing budgets, teaching children and youth, or being a cluster leader or Stephen Minister in congregational care.

Whether you are studying Luke-Acts to lead a class or a blueprints to make sure sanctuary construction is headed in the right direction. Whether you are preparing a toilet for better flushing or preparing the music for better singing.

Whether you are leading the prayers of the people or encouraging people to be grateful and generous with their time, talent and treasure. Whether you are planning mission activities to help all of us serve our community or figuring out how to do outreach to find others who need a church community. Whether you are preparing the communion table with bread and wine or the fellowship table with coffee and snacks, all of these tasks are done to glorify God and to serve God's people generously and cheerfully.

So what if you are feeling irritated and put upon like Martha? Well, go out and invite others into the kitchen, not with your griping, but with your desire to spend time with them. Or find a way to accomplish your mundane tasks with greater joy in your heart. Every vacuum stroke can be a prayer, and pulling weeds is a helpful metaphor for the Christian life.

Brother Lawrence was a humble cook who experienced life in the kingdom of God to its fullest by learning to commune with God everyday—and every hour of the day—even during his ordinary work. In short, he learned the art of living in the presence of God throughout the day. He himself once said, “I am doing now what I will do for all eternity. I am blessing God, praising Him, adoring him, and loving Him with all my heart.” Brother Lawrence entered the monastic life with a Martha attitude but he learned in humility to “The Practice of the Presence of God” the title of a book written about him in the 17th century.

I challenge you to take whatever church or home or school or workplace task you despise the most, and turn it into a time of prayer, of praising God for your blessings. Resist worry and distraction. Spend time listening to Jesus, whether you are quiet or busy. Knock, search, ask, persist. If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God give you the Holy Spirit, if only you'd ask. It's about prayerful devotion. It's about having an attitude of gratitude. *Take Thou our minds, Dear Lord, we humbly pray. Give us the mind of Christ each passing day. Teach us to know the truth that sets us free. Grant us in all our thoughts to honor Thee.*