

## **Finding the Focus**

**Luke 10:38-42 Psalm 52; 7-18-10**

The summer is a wonderful time for pastors who use the lectionary as a preaching guide. In this time of year, known as “Ordinary Time” on the church calendar, we encounter wonderful, familiar stories and parables that cause us to reflect on the human condition and how an abiding faith in God can enrich and nourish us.

How often have we heard the story of Mary and Martha? In my 30 years of ministry I have preached on it close to thirty times. But, I have found that my brief sermons or meditations are never the same. That is because, I am in a different place on my faith journey just as you are on yours. We see things differently when we begin to open our eyes as we grow in wisdom and knowledge.

Mary was the student sitting at the feet of Jesus soaking up all he was sharing. Martha was the busy sister, always doing, doing, doing and never quite sure she was doing enough.

It annoyed Martha to be stuck with all the tasks of being a hostess while her sister just sat there doing nothing. We know, in our hearts and from our own lives, that, had Mary been helping her, things would never have been done the way Martha thought was best, and a different conflict would have appeared. But, in our story Martha felt put upon, so, she complained to Jesus. We hope he was not in the middle of telling a story or relaying a parable when she interrupted him. No one likes to be interrupted in mid-sentence, even by a friend. Jesus’ response to her was quite brief and to the point. He told Martha that Mary had chosen wisely and had found a better focus in life than all of Martha’s dashing around. Mary was a finding a focus in life that would sustain her while Martha was occupied with handling trivial matters that would not remain handled and that she would have to do them all over again.

We all know and love the Marys and Marthas in our lives and in our selves. But, if we stop to think about it, we come to understand that while all the “doing” might be necessary, “being” is even more so.

I have friends who pack their days, nights and weekends with endless activity. They run on a tight schedule that allows for little spontaneity and for little to no reflection on the direction of their lives.

When I was a seminarian, those many years, ago, I operated on a tight schedule. My life was made up of trips to the South Side of Chicago three times a week, interning at a church, and maintaining a relatively decent family life for my daughters. There was always something that had to be done.

One of my seminary classes was named “Saga.” It was a group therapy sort of thing that was designed to make certain we were cut out for ministry. It was a class that met for a concentrated period of time once each week and then we would have individual sessions with the profs on a monthly basis. Our very first sessions were held in cottages scattered among the towering dunes lining the shore of Lake Michigan.

During one of my individual sessions, the teacher I was working with, Dr. Phil Anderson, asked me a question that was and is profoundly life changing. After reading a draft of my M. Div paper “Along the Yellow Brick Road,” he reflected for a moment, then asked, “Alice, what is it you are running to, or from?” This question made me stop then and wonder what my life was all about. Where was the emptiness and where was the wholeness in it? What was it I was running from or to—something without or something within? It is a question I continue to ask to this day. It is a question that can never be fully answered because life moves on and so do we, whether we know it or not. I learned from this class that it is best to sit down and reflect from time to time to discover where my course of life might need correction. I smile at this because I have made some decisions that I have had to reflect upon and reverse every now and then. When I do have to do this, I remind myself that it’s O.K. because, as someone once said, “Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.” True or not, I like that quote.

So, I sit and reflect and might hum “Do you know where you’re going to? Do you like the things that life is showing you, where are you going to? Do you know? Do you get what you’re hoping for when you look behind you there’s no open doors; What are you hoping for? Do you know?” During times of reflection, if I don’t like what I see, I tweak things a bit. That relationship that has been so frustrating and that I hoped I could close the door on renews itself in some strange way. That dead-end I might hit when dealing with some financial issues might suddenly reveal a new detour or course of action.

I like to think that I leave doors open so that I will have no regrets as I approach the end of my life. John Greenleaf Whittier wrote these words in a poem “Maud Muller,” “The saddest words of tongue or pen, are these four words, It might have been.” I do not want to have regrets for opportunities lost.

I don’t want others to have those regrets, either. So, when they come to talk to me about lives that have gotten off track, and that is always when they come to talk to me, not when things are going well—I tell them to take some time to reflect on whatever it is that is happening and decide if they like the way things are going. What is it you are running to or from—could it be yourself? Do you like what you see? If not, change direction a bit, open your mind and see the limitless possibilities. Work to develop relationships, open your heart to love and stop looking for whatever it is that holds you back—move on with less fear of the future. Take that risk. Have no regrets.

Mary was certainly not going to have any regrets. She had decided the direction her life would take and she had the teacher before her. She understood that there was no time like the present to move toward a life of more abundance. Martha, too caught up in the mundane, lost her chance to find her focus and discover the true meaning and value of life. The good news is that we have the opportunity to learn from their stores choose the way we want to walk.

*-- Amen*