

Worried and Distracted

A Reflection for Morning Worship on the Star Words: *Focus & Grounded-ness*
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 27, 2022

Texts: Luke 10:38-42

This morning's reading is a familiar story about the time Jesus seemingly chastises someone – Martha – for being worried and distracted. Well, dear ones, this morning and for the past several mornings we have all been Martha. We have all been worried and distracted as the news reports of the war in Ukraine have thrown us all for a loop. Putin's unprovoked attack of Ukraine and total disregard for legal international borders is simply incomprehensible. The news reports' eerie similarities to Hitler's actions in 1939 have us all worried and distracted, with good cause. Are we at the brink of another World War brought about by a world leader whose personal desires for empire defy logic? As I write this, we just don't know. Worried and distracted? Of course we are! Here's hoping our old friends Mary and Martha can help us sort through these feelings as we try to move forward with life in these uncertain days. Let's see.

The story of Mary and Martha is, on the surface at least, an easy to imagine domestic scene, one that could, and probably has, happened to us. Two women, two sisters, have agreed to entertain a mutual friend for dinner, the supposition undoubtedly being that they would both be equally committed to the work such a meal would entail. Now that the planned evening is here, one sister, Martha, scurries around in the kitchen out of sight while the other sister, Mary, sits and chats with the dinner guest without a care in the world. Martha realizes what is going on and tries to make the best of it but she gets angrier and angrier the more it

becomes obvious Mary has no intention of coming to help. Finally, Martha gets so furious she stomps out to the room where she sees Mary and their dinner guest – JESUS! – chatting away.

As is so often the case with these stories about Jesus, there is more than one way to look at it. Most often this story is viewed as Jesus chiding Martha – the busy sister – for paying attention to the wrong thing – whether or not her sister is helping her. Jesus, so this view goes, is teaching Martha – and all of us by extension – that Mary has made the right choice to put all of her focus and attention on Jesus while she could. This can only mean that Martha has made the wrong choice by fussing in the kitchen when she should have been listening to Jesus. But this is such an overly simplistic view of what is actually a complex interaction. One obvious question this interpretation leaves unanswered is a practical one -- who was going to make dinner? Obviously the two sisters had invited their friend Jesus to dinner and it wasn't going to make itself. Eventually, someone was going to have to do the work, and this was what irked Martha. But then, someone will say Martha was just jealous that her sister Mary was monopolizing Jesus. Really? There couldn't be something more going on here?

How about we consider this story from another perspective. Perhaps this is a story about two women who are both making valid, though vastly different, choices. Martha was doing all the work because she was the “doer” of the two sisters. She was the woman of action, the woman who went after things. Mary, on the other hand, was more the laid back, a “we'll figure out something” kind of person who was much more interested in what Jesus was saying than what they'd eat for dinner. Perhaps Martha, most likely having been in this predicament with her sister before, sees

in this situation a chance to have Mary set straight by someone she respects. So Martha asks Jesus to intervene. Jesus does, but not in the way Martha hoped.

Instead, Jesus points out to Martha that she is distracted by her worries about many things when there is need of only one thing for her to focus on. Then he tells her Mary has chosen “the better part” and that it (the better part) will not be taken away from her. Over the millennia this simple verbal exchange has been interpreted as Jesus scolding Martha for worrying more about the things of this world instead of salvation, heaven and eternal life where food won’t matter anyway. By implication, Mary was doing the right thing – making the right choice – by listening raptly to Jesus teach, presumably about salvation, heaven and eternal life.

And there’s the big problem with understanding what this text is really all about – the text does not have Jesus explaining what “the better part” actually is. Nor does Jesus chide Martha. He just states the obvious – she is worried and distracted about many things – preparing the food, cleaning up, etc., etc. Jesus is not telling Martha she’s wrong for what she chooses. He’s telling her she’s allowing herself to get worked up about stuff too much. Seen through this lens, Jesus is actually worried about Martha whom he sees as working too hard, doing too much without thinking about herself. So, Jesus is not really saying one sister is right and the other sister is wrong. He’s saying life is all about making choices *in the moment* and our choices define who we are. Jesus isn’t choosing one sister as virtuous and the other as sinful, an interpretation all too common with this story. He’s saying they are both being human, and that’s okay. He is teaching them that

focus is a good thing but it must always be balanced with a strong sense of what grounds you in your life, the abiding love of God.

We see this difference between these same two sisters in another well-known Bible story, this one in the Gospel of John. This story is about Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus. Here the two sisters are once again portrayed as having very different temperaments. Martha, the proactive and practical sister, goes out to meet Jesus as he is traveling to them in Bethany after they sent word to him of Lazarus' illness. Mary once again the more passive and spiritual sister remains at home in mourning, surrounded by family and friends. They each have a different focus in the moment – Martha's focus is doing something while Mary's is just to be fully in the moment, whatever it is.

After speaking with Jesus, Martha goes back home to get Mary. Interesting here is that both sisters say the same thing when encountering Jesus for the first time – “My brother would not have died if you had been here.” But Jesus responds totally differently to each sister. To Martha whom he encounters on the road, he uses this moment to explain to her, in the midst of a back and forth conversation, that all who believe in him will not die but have eternal life. Martha then affirms her belief in him as the Messiah and goes home to find Mary. When Mary then encounters Jesus, she says to him again, “My brother would not have died if you had been here.” But this time, confronted by the weeping Mary and the weeping friends who had come with her, Jesus himself begins to lose control of his emotions. He begins to weep. Again, the two sisters encounter Jesus with vastly different outcomes. With Martha, Jesus uses their conversation as a

teachable moment, encouraging and empowering her to name and claim her belief that he is the Messiah. With Mary, Jesus allows himself to be touched to the core of his humanity with her tears calling forth his own. He needed both sisters to encounter the full reality of the situation for himself and for the disciples following him and the crowds gathering at Bethany. In this moment they provided him with the grounded-ness he needed to cope with the situation confronting him. He needed both Martha and Mary as who they were to make possible this pivotal moment in his life and ministry for it was this event of the raising of Lazarus that put him on the course that would ultimately lead to his crucifixion in Jerusalem.

Both sisters, just as they were, were important to and beloved by Jesus. He did not choose one or the other as more righteous or more correct or more what the perfect woman should be. He affirmed them both as beloved of God. They were not less than to Jesus because they were women. They were not objects of criticism or ridicule in either of these stories, much as some have tried to make them into such over the millennia. These were two distinctive women, strong women, each in their own way – something Jesus recognized and validated as only he could.

In this story, Jesus takes the simple observation that Martha is worried and distracted and teaches us a profound lesson for these uncertain times through which we are living. Jesus wants us to see that we are able to set aside the worries and distractions that keep us up at night by holding on to the truth that there is a better part to life which comes to us through the choices we make all the time. We make this choice – to be worried to the point of distraction – over and over again, every

day without even realizing it. The language we choose to talk with each other about our worries matters. The choices we make in how we treat everyone – women, men, old people young people, people different from us, even the people we most dislike – matters. It all comes down to choices. Will we treat others with respect and kindness? Even more important, will we treat ourselves with respect ... and kindness? Treating ourselves with respect and kindness, now there's an idea. Recognizing in ourselves that we are worried and distracted and are therefore in desperate need of a change of perspective, a change of pace, a move away from worry, distraction and fear. We need a new focus that reminds us of who and whose we are – beloved children of an amazing God. We need to ground ourselves in this vision of ourselves as precious to God so that we are able to make the life-altering pivot away from uncertainty and fear, leaning in instead toward hope, and trust that somehow, some way God is still in the middle of this mess we call life in the year 2022. God needs us to make the choice of living each day with an attitude of kindness and gentleness, with and for ourselves, with and for each other.

What can we do about Ukraine and all the fears this war is provoking in ourselves and around the world? Simple. We can pray. We must pray for the people of Ukraine, all the people – the ones fighting and the ones fleeing, the agnostics and all the folks of the Jewish and many Christian traditions there who are terrified of what could happen to them if this invasion is successful. We must pray for the people here in the US who are worried about family members still in Ukraine. We must pray for our own military and NATO forces being activated for the just in

case scenario we all dread. And we must pray for their families. Whatever you may think about him, we must pray for our President, and his entire leadership team, that they make wise decisions that lead toward peace. And, dear ones, we must pray for the Russians because, even though it's easy to forget, Jesus did tell us quite directly that we are to pray for our enemies. And our prayer need be only a simple one – Help us God! This is a mess we don't know how to deal with. Have mercy on us and make clear the way forward.

Dear ones, of course we are all worried and distracted these days. It's been too long a journey through Covid and Covid craziness. It's been too long a journey surrounded by loud people with selfish motives and meanness dripping from every word and every action they take. It's been too long a journey through continual political nastiness and social isolation. It's time to make a different choice. It's time to choose life, choose hope, choose the promises of Jesus and be kind to ourselves. It's time to lay down our worries and distractions, putting them solidly into God's outstretched hands. Is this easy to do? Heck no! Just ask Martha! Is it the kindest thing, the healthiest thing, to do for ourselves? Yes. That's what Mary had figured out. That's what Jesus wanted for her, for Martha and for us. No matter what. Imagine that. Amen.