



From the Pulpit: July 17, 2022

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 10:38–42

To Bless the Space Between Us, V: Callings

This summer at Kenilworth Union Church we’re following the ministry of Jesus as told to us according to the Gospel of Luke chapter 10.

And I’ll bet Martha is an eldest and Mary is a youngest. Maybe Lazarus is in the middle. Because firstborns love to comply and perform and please, and youngests like to do what they like to do.

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus’s feet and listened to what he was saying. 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.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part.”

When Martha complains about Mary, Jesus replies, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. Mary has chosen the better part.”

“When Martha complains about Mary, Jesus replies, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. Mary has chosen the better part.’”

“Martha, Martha,” says Jesus. That repetition of the name signals a gentle rebuke, doesn’t it? When my wife says, “William, William,” I know I’m in trouble.

“Martha, Martha,” says Jesus. It made one Bible scholar think of a 1960’s sitcom.¹ “Martha, Martha, Martha!” This is *The Brady Bunch* with a lisp.

Remember last week we looked at The Good Samaritan? This story happens immediately next. These stories belong together because they are opposites and counterparts.

An important guest comes to dinner. One sister scurries around scaring up a lavish repast worthy of Alinea and the other one instantly grabs a goblet of grenache, sits down on the couch, and starts chatting him up.

Industrious Martha complains to Jesus about slothful Mary. I’ll bet this dispute’s been going on between them since they both learned to walk and talk.

In last week’s story, a lawyer asks Jesus, “What is the meaning of life?” and instead of answering him directly, Jesus tells him a story and gives him an example, and when he’s finished with the story, Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

¹ Karoline Lewis, “No Comparison,” *Working Preacher*, July 10, 2016.

The story of Mary and Martha is that story's counterpart and opposite. In The Good Samaritan story, Jesus says, "Go and do." In this story, he says "Sit and listen." Don't just **DO** something. **SIT** there!

So how do you preach a sermon when you disagree with Jesus? I'm kind of on Martha's side, and I'll tell you why. It's because I'm a Mary. I love to sit at Jesus' feet and listen. I spent eight years in seminary sitting at Jesus's feet and listening. For the last 37 years, I've spent at least two days a week studying Jesus.

That's what comes naturally to me because I am manually and mechanically challenged. I can barely change a light bulb or hang a picture, and because we sort of naturally admire people who can do what we **can't**, I admire Martha.

I love the omniscient. I love Jason Bourne and Jack Reacher and Denzel Washington and Charlize Theron and Liam Neeson: "I have a very particular set of skills. Skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you."

I admire people who can hotwire a car, fly an airplane and jump out of it, ride a motorcycle up a set of steps, and surgically remove a bullet from their own shoulder. I love doers and solvers and leaders. That's how I think of Martha.

But of course the Church needs both Martha and Mary. The Church spends half of its time listening to Jesus at worship and Bible Study and the other half serving friends at Dinners for Eight or working at the soup kitchen or repairing the homes of the poor.

You remember how this whole section of Luke's Gospel got started, right before The Good Samaritan story? A lawyer asks Jesus "What is the meaning of life?" and the answer is "Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself."

That is to say, Christianity has a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension. We spend half of our

time listening to God and the other half serving our neighbor. We remember this every time we see a Christian cross with its vertical post and its horizontal beam. Mary's good at the vertical and Martha's good at the horizontal.

One Bible scholar pointed out that that's why there are scores, maybe hundreds, of Christian Churches which call themselves Saints Mary and Martha: Saints Mary and Martha Catholic Church or Saint Mary and Saint Martha Lutheran Church. It's because we need them both and that's what makes a complete, muscular, healthy congregation.²

So if you are a doer, a solver, a leader, a Type 'A', or an eldest, just remember to take time out to sit at Jesus'

"Christianity has a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension. We spend half of our time listening to God and the other half serving our neighbor."

feet and listen.

A lot of our congregation forgot this, but we're here every Sunday at 8:30 and 10 a.m. Why don't you take a moment to sit at Jesus' feet? We have all these spectacular learning opportunities presented by brilliant scholars like Katie and Christine.

It will ground you. It will balance you. It will calm you down. And it will make you an infinitely more fascinating conversationalist at a dinner party.

² Marilyn Salmon pointed this out in "Commentary on Luke 10:38-42," *Working Preacher*, July 18, 2010.

Cultivate a rich, multidimensional inner life, that vertical dimension. Personally, I am a Presbyterian because in that small and diminishing corner of the Church Catholic, they try to practice the stewardship of the life of the mind, that vertical dimension of human existence, that inner dimension.

Slow down. Lose the to-do list. Just be. Take time to listen to Jesus. Take time to listen to the earth. Take off your shoes. The ground you're standing on is holy. A Buck moon on Wednesday, a Supermoon, an unmerited benediction.

Friday night I went to a movie theater for the first time in two-and-a-half years. *Where the Crawdads Sing* is the only film that could have gotten me there. I loved Delia Owens novel so much, I just had to see the film.

Tate, the love of Kya's life, studies his native marshlands for the University of North Carolina. He's out there in the rivulets and tall grasses collecting specimens, and he places a drop of marsh water under a microscope and asks Kya to look, and Kya catches her breath "as a Mardi Gras of costumed players pirouettes and careens into view. Unimaginable headdresses adorned astonishing bodies so eager for more life, they frolicked as though caught in a circus tent, in a single bead of water."

Tate watches Kya for a moment, and he thinks, "She feels the pulse of life, because there are no layers between her and her planet." Are there layers of worry and distraction between you and your planet? Have you listened to the pulse of life?

Kya whispers, "It's like never having seen the stars, then suddenly seeing them."³ Have you seen the stars, in a drop of marsh water or in the stygian abyss of the night sky?

After she saw those stunning images from the Webb Telescope this week, Kathy Piepgras wrote me, "Now we know what the primary source of Love and Wisdom has been up to for the last 13 billion years. Not so?"

"It will ground you. It will balance you. It will calm you down. And it will make you an infinitely more fascinating conversationalist at a dinner party."

If you're too busy scaring up a Michelin-starred feast that you can't take a moment to go speechless with wonder—well, I don't know how to help you.

Ferris Bueller says, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."⁴

At least in this story, Jesus preferred Mary. I like Martha. We need them both. We must **be** them both.

³ Delia Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2018), pp. 279–280.

⁴ Ferris Bueller.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Holy God we approach you with hearts tender with our community's sorrow. Still reeling from unspeakable tragedy and the sharp awareness of human violence and suffering, we look to the heavens which still proclaim your glory. We stand in awe of the new images meeting human eyes for the first time: Images of swirling galaxies of celestial star-dust, the glimpses of deep space wombs where stars beyond our imagining are being birthed into light, and the images of Jupiter's iridescent textured atmosphere.

Our flesh tingles and our knees wobble as we try to take in the vastness of your creation, O God. Your blessings more than the visible stars even outnumbering the immeasurable galaxies that lie behind a grain of sand in an outstretched arm. In awestruck wonder we witness anew what your hand has made.

As we know your presence in the unimaginable vastness, so help us to know your nearness among us. Make us attentive to your voice, heard in cries of children born in humble places, and complicated situations where life is at risk. Help us to notice you in the small spaces: the miniscule distance between a gentle hand on a tired shoulder, indwelling between the comforter and the comforted. Reveal yourself to us O God, in the eyes of our neighbors, even those we can barely manage to greet, and especially those with whom we hold long grudges.

May all that is close and tender, and all that is vast stardust imagining, continually transform us O God. Tune our hearts to love for you and your people again and again. Continue to dazzle us with irresistible grace. Enfold us into Christ's church. Form us into agents of your mercy and proliferators of your peace as we name before you the cares of the world.

For this life-giving, blue marble planet we call home we give thanks. Lord, hear our prayers for the restoration of our environment, for clean water, for rich soil to grow food, for pure air to breathe, and for the diversity of plants and animals that inhabit your world with us.

For your justice and peace to spread across the world, Lord hear our prayers: for all nations to live in harmony, for all who are trampled by unjust treatment, for all whose economic circumstances make them invisible, for the hurt we inflict on one another.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers for all who are sick, facing surgery, awaiting the diagnosis, struggling with clouds of depression, and for all caretakers. We ask that you bring your healing and comfort to hearts, minds, and bodies. Where there is grief, be ever close.

Merciful God, we offer you our spoken and silent prayers in faith and steadfast hope that you hear our prayers, as we join our voices to pray as Jesus teaches us: Our Father.... Amen.

**You may use these prayers for non-commercial purposes in any medium, provided you include a brief credit line with the author's name (if applicable) and a link to the original post.*