

## Mary and Martha: Course Correction

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### Luke 10:38-42

**38** Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him.<sup>[a]</sup> **39** She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's<sup>[b]</sup> 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** but few things are needed—indeed only one.<sup>[c]</sup> Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Good morning. Several weeks ago, Christiane preached on what she thought was the lectionary text for that day, only to find out it was from another year – (as many of you may know, the lectionary goes in 3 year cycles). But because she had already put in a fair amount of work on her sermon she decided to stick with the text that she had chosen, only to then discover that Maeve had recently preached on that very same text. Still she kept to the text. After all, this text and every text has been preached on by countless number of people over the centuries and her sermon on it was not the first nor would it be the last. I had to smile at this because I had preached on the story of Mary and Martha in 2019 and my fear was not that I was repeating what someone else had said about this text but that I was repeating myself. I did go back and re-read

what I had written and also some of my other sermons. And guess what, I am repeating myself just not from the earlier Mary and Martha sermon. What I discovered, however, were threads that run through much of what I write. Last Sunday Eileen Morse, Sarah Gallop and I were talking about how we prepare our sermons. Eileen told us something that Frederick Buechner had said about preaching. There is always one person who needs to hear the sermon that day and that person is the preacher. The more I thought about this, I realized that the reason these threads and themes keep coming up and that I keep re-visiting is because they are important to me and they are still working in me. Hopefully when I repeat something I am expanding on what I have said earlier or my understanding of the thread or theme has changed. After all I am not the same person today that I was then and the world has changed as well. I like to think that God is still speaking to me and through me and I am still listening for some new insight, some new understanding. So here is how I hear and understand the story of Mary and Martha today.

First, some context. The story of Mary and Martha takes place near the Sea of Galilee where Jesus has gone with his disciples – it is a time for Jesus to get away from the threat he faces in Jerusalem and also an opportunity for him to teach and prepare his disciples for what awaits Jesus and them when they return to Jerusalem. The passage that precedes this text and the one that follows it are two very familiar lessons that Jesus is laying out for his disciples: the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Lord's Prayer. And in this passage, the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus reveals another lesson – he is identifying the most essential thing for discipleship: our relationship with Jesus and God.

Often this passage is interpreted as describing the two components of discipleship – service and devotion. And many, especially women, would have heard this story as Jesus chastising Martha and elevating Mary over her sister. But I think what this story is

really about is Jesus pointing out to Martha that she is not present. He is talking about Martha not connecting with him. What if we heard in Jesus's words to Martha, not a rebuke or a comparison but an invitation, as if he were extending his hand to her to join him, to sit with him, to be in relationship with him; a relationship that once established will withstand the worries and distractions that will eventually return, as they always do. What if Jesus is asking Martha to connect and to collaborate with him? What if he is saying to Martha, choose me, today and every day.

Now we don't know what Martha's response was; if she actually heard Jesus or took him up on his invitation. Up until this point, Martha has been distracted and worried about all the tasks she thinks are necessary. And the worry has turned to irritation with her sister and probably I am guessing with Jesus himself.

I think we all know a little something about worry and distraction. I think we may be hardwired for it. If you were here last Sunday when Sarah talked about her mother's secret to long life being that she didn't worry. You could see it in all those pictures – in none of them did she look worried. I myself find it hard not worry or be distracted. In fact, I find myself often consumed by worry about our country, our world and our planet, and the future for our children. We are assaulted on a daily basis by a steady stream of hateful language and cruel actions, by lies and distortions, by attempts to vanish people; and by suffering that just seems to increase every day. And how many studies, articles and podcasts have you heard recently about an epidemic of loneliness and this paradox between on the one hand being the most connected we have ever been in terms of access to information and each other and yet at the same time feeling the most disconnected and isolated. I think there's good reason to worry.

But here's the thing I am discovering about worry. Do you know what the origin of the word, worry, is? It comes from the Old English word “wyrgan” which means to strangle or choke as in the teeth of an animal gripping the throat of its prey. And when

do we worry? Usually when we are alone. More often than not worry is a solitary activity; and if unattended it may lead to despair and hopelessness. In much the same way that the COVID pandemic threatened our very breath, worry too is threatening our ability to breathe easily and robbing us of hope and joy. It keeps us from connecting with God and each other. It keeps us from taking action, from joining forces with God and our fellow human beings. It's a roadblock to connection and collaboration.

In this mindset, I have found myself thinking about thresholds and am wondering if we aren't at some crossroads in our history. I have been visited by images and memories of late. Recently, I came across the movie, ***Castaway***, on TV, and couldn't get that last scene out of my mind. At the very end of the movie after Tom Hanks has finally made it home and re-unites with his former fiancée, whose memory and his love for her have sustained him through all the time he spent on that deserted island. And he is heartbroken to discover that after all this time, she has moved on, married and has a child. But she has kept the car they shared and returns it to him. As he drives away from her in that last scene, the camera pans out and up and we see his car approaching a 4 way intersection and stopping. Which direction will he choose? Where does he go? He can't go back to his old life. He's at a crossroads.

I am also reminded of a workshop I attended a number of years ago. The workshop was titled **Course Corrections** and I decided to borrow it for today's sermon. In this workshop, we studied the story of Saul's transformation into Paul in the Book of Acts. Saul is on the road to Damascus to hunt down and persecute the followers of Jesus when he encounters Jesus and is blinded, in the dark and helpless. His sight is restored after 3 days but eventually Saul does a 180 degree; Saul becomes Paul and now that fierce devotion to persecuting the followers of Jesus is transformed into a fierce devotion to Jesus. Talk about a course correction! In that workshop we also talked about our own course corrections and I recall a metaphor that was used called

dead reckoning – a nautical term for when you are adrift in the dead of night in open waters and there is nothing to guide you - no navigational tools, no current, no wind, no stars or moon to light the way, no land in sight. When I remembered this workshop, I had to wonder: is this where we are now? Are we in a kind of dead reckoning? Are we facing a course correction?

And the last memory I'll share is from a course I took at Andover Newton. Our teacher had arranged for us to interview the Christian theologian, Phyllis Tickle, shortly before her death. I remember she had written a book called the ***Great Emergence*** in which she described her theory of how the Christian church has a huge yard sale roughly every 500 years – discarding what isn't working, adopting a new direction. If you start with the birth of Jesus, then proceed 500 years to the Dark Ages and the church basically going underground with the establishment of monasteries which housed our early Christian mystics, then 500 years to the Great Schism where the Christian church split in half, the Eastern and Western branches, then 500 years to the Reformation, another huge shift for the church, and finally here we are in the 21st century. Think about it. Are we experiencing another yard sale? What is the direction of our church today? What is our church being called into today? What is God asking of us as disciples? Is this a course correction for the church?

As for our country taking stock, I have heard a lot of talk lately about re-visioning our political future. That what was working in the past doesn't seem to be working now. I am reminded of the words of John Lewis who implored us to re-imagine what we want our future to look like and then live like that future already existed; practice it into being. Whether we are talking about our church, our country or the world, I don't know what that future is but I am pretty sure I won't find it by myself. I do think this re-visioning will require connection, collaboration and making choices. Worry is a choice, hope is a choice; connection is a choice, collaboration is a choice. And I am also

convinced that we may need to make these choices every single day because we forget, we get distracted, we worry. It may require a daily mantra, such as getting up every day and saying aloud, “Today is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice in it. Let us choose hope over worry, joy over despair, love over hate. Let us choose to connect and collaborate with God and with each other.” I do believe that this is what God desires for us – to work with us in charting our course.

I'm going to close with a poem per my usual habit. I find hope, and joy and wisdom in poetry. This poem speaks to me about connection, collaboration and choice. It's about Paul Robeson, a famous black singer from the 30s, 40s and 50s with the most beautiful bass/baritone voice. Robeson was very active politically, protesting the Korean War, supporting workers' rights and deeply involved in the civil rights movement. Because of his politics, the US government revoked his passport. He had concerts lined up in Canada and in those days you didn't need a passport to go to Canada. But then the government then forbade him to travel internationally. So concerts were re-located to the Washington state/Canadian border at the Peace Arch which was constructed in 1814 to commemorate the signing of the Treaty of Ghent and to symbolize the long history of peace between our two nations. Nearly 25,000 people gathered on both sides of the border - with Robeson performing from the American side.

***“Cross That Line”***

**Naomi Shihab Nye**

“Paul Robeson stood  
on the northern border  
of the USA  
and sang into Canada

where a vast audience  
sat on folding chairs  
waiting to hear him.  
He sang into Canada.  
His voice left the USA  
when his body was  
not allowed to cross that line.

Remind us again,  
brave friend.  
What countries may we  
sing into?

What lines should we all  
be crossing?

What songs travel toward us  
from far away  
to deepen our days?"