

Grace and Peace to you from a God who serves and is served not only through our actions but our hearts and willingness to listen to, learn from, and know one another.

For my first call out of seminary, I pastored a bilingual congregation in San Francisco for a year. It was called La Iglesia Luterana Santa Maria y Santa Marta. There is a mural in the small sanctuary unmatched compared to many I've seen. The scene is quite breathtaking, the colors so vivid I could stare at it over and over again and always feel uninhibited, seeing newness in it every time I looked at it. In the foreground is a desert oasis surrounded by palm trees; to the side are large clay pots that feed the oasis. Surrounding the clay pots are colorful flowers, vines, and reeds. Feeding into the pots themselves are streams of water coming from above, flowing out of the skirts of two women floating on clouds: Saint Mary and Saint Martha. The women with dark olive skin and long, fluid hair hold two clay canisters. They're drawing from a smaller, floating pool of water that also spills over into the oasis below. Above the floating pool is Christ, his hands outstretched as if he's in this constant state of blessing and producing the water--the water, his water, that persists in quenching the thirst of the desert and those of us below. Just looking at the mural makes me feel alive and refreshed, as if I'm being splashed with Christ's living water in my sheer amazement of it all.

I think of this scene every time I read the story of Mary and Martha in Scripture. These two sisters were disciples of Jesus, women who offered Jesus hospitality and sat at his feet to listen to his teachings and learn from his example. Martha advocated for their brother Lazarus in the Gospel of John; she called on Jesus when her brother died, soon before Jesus resurrected him. And Mary believed to be the same Mary Magdalene we know and love, witnessed Jesus' death on the cross and accompanied his body to the tomb. On Sunday morning, she was the first to get to his tomb, and, seeing that it was empty, went and informed the disciples that someone had taken Jesus' body away.

These two women are often pitted against each other in our gospel text for this morning. Mary appears to be the smarter, more obedient disciple. All Martha cares about is completing her tasks and she sort of tattles on Mary in a way, making herself appear juvenile. My colleague, Karoline Lewis, the professor of preaching at Luther Seminary, wrote a fabulous article about our societal tendency to set these two women and all women at odds with each other. She writes, "To put women in a place where they are too busy competing against each other to rise up against the injustice of sexism. Well-played." My sermon isn't going to focus on sexism, at least not for this morning, but her point is so valid. We shouldn't be focused on who's the better disciple in our gospel text for today. Service and learning, action and education, both of what the two women represent in our text are important as we go along our discipleship journey.

What I instead want us to focus on is Martha's state of mind, her essence of distraction, which is so often the state in which we operate today. Like Martha, we all too often feel torn, burdened, and disjointed with our many tasks and the world's biggest woes that we forget to slow down, pause, give thanks, and sit at the feet of Jesus, internalizing the reverence of God's creation and especially the relationships we've been blessed to hold with and alongside others. Men are just as susceptible to busying themselves as women are. We all ran around burning the candle at both ends.

The word distraction is used twice in our gospel text this morning. In verse 40 it states, "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.'" It's then used again in verse 41 when Jesus says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things." In the original Greek, these are actually two different words that hold two slightly different connotations. In the latter reference, in verse 41, the word means distraction, like when one's focus is diverted. Earlier in verse 40, however, the Greek word means torn, ripped apart, or split between so much that one has no capacity to see the bigger picture or what they're missing out on.

With all that goes on in the world today, as we listen to the news and contemplate the state of humanity, I resonate with this kind of distraction more and more. It's not so much that my focus is being diverted, rather I, myself, feel torn, ripped apart, and split down the middle. I don't want to be as divided as the world is trying to force me to be. Shootings, wars, disasters, pestilence. Divisiveness, strain, and scorn are around every corner. How do we find our center when violence keeps breeding hurt, fear, suffering, and trauma?

Perhaps God's Gospel in Christ can point us in the right direction? As we look at our Gospel text, meaning our good news text or texts in Scripture that point to Jesus and God's love for us in and through Christ, we'll notice Jesus working to center us and so many others on the actual task at hand--which is our calling and opportunity to sit down with him and each other, like at Mary and Jesus did, to reflect, ponder, relate, and feel supported. Martha was showing hospitality, she was emitting friendliness, providing reception--Jesus calls us to these tasks too, especially when it comes to welcoming the stranger and the poor. On the other hand, she was torn and scattered, stretched with too many tasks she wasn't experiencing the joy that comes from completing them. Whenever we turn into Martha's, this is when Jesus calls us to quiet ourselves, to sit down, to bask in his light and his favor, to speak to one another, and remember that God is in the midst of all our brokenness, working to resurrect and refresh, revitalize, and reorient our focus toward face-to-face conversations and connections with each other.

There are 7,468 charitable organizations in Montana. That's a lot of people providing a lot of services, which is all great in a lot of ways. But I wonder how much our world would actually start to heal if we practiced spending a little less time "doing for" others and a lot more time relating to and getting to know one another. A little more eye contact, a few more smiles, more stories told, more listening taking place, more time spent relating, and better connections had.

I talk about it a lot because it's my belief, based on the organizations I've worked for and the ways people genuinely try to help others, that the root of all suffering, pain, and hurt is really isolation, exclusion, and abandonment--the loss of connection we're all experiencing in one way, shape, or form these days. And the world has its ways of isolating us so we continue to fill our chasmic longings for love and affection with addictions, gadgets, and other falsehoods. As we leave today, I'm urging us to not only picture ourselves in Mary's shoes today and onward, sitting at the feet of Jesus, but also follow her lead. It takes intentionality to slow down and not just "do," but listen, relate, and support. When we do, it becomes more than a temporary fix. It's like we're being filled with living water that quenches every thirst. It's like Christ's water spilling over into the oasis of whatever desert we or a neighbor may be trudging through right now.

Slow down, sit at Jesus' feet, share in each other's time and see the face of God. This is servanthood at its best. Amen.