

Worry and Distraction

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One of the interesting things about studying the bible as an adult is finding the places where I thought I knew a story, but when I go to read it in the bible itself, I find the ways our culture has filled in parts of the story that aren't there.

For example, there is no apple mentioned in the garden of Eden, just fruit. The story of Jesus' birth says there were wise men who came to visit but never specifies three. Jonah was swallowed by a great fish, but it doesn't say it's a whale. There is no place anywhere that scripture says, "God helps those who help themselves" or "God works in mysterious ways."

And this is true in the story about Jesus' visit with Mary and Martha too. If you are familiar with the story, you'll know that it is often assumed Martha was in the kitchen making a meal. And perhaps, she was, but there is no mention of food or the kitchen in the story at all. The assumption that she was making a meal, however, has led some people to see Jesus' chiding Martha for spending her time worrying over dinner. This interpretation has created a kind of "looking down" on work that is often prescribed to women and a view that things like the hospitality of providing a meal is somehow unimportant or lesser work. It leads to the view that sitting at Jesus' feet, studying and listening is the "real" work and Martha is a "silly woman" all worked up over the less important dinner.

However, Pastor Shannon Kershner points out the many ways this could be interpreted. She says, "the words used for "tasks" are forms of the word *diakonia*, service—words related to ministry (Holly Hearon, "Luke 10:38–42, *Interpretation*, vol. 58, no. 4, October 2004, pp. 393–395). A *diakonos*, a deacon, was a leader in the early church, just as they are today. In Luke–Acts, words related to this noun refer to a variety of duties—everything from table service, to financial or material support, to the proclamation of the word, to ministry in general. It is a real possibility that Martha might not have been rushing around trying to get a meal together for dinner.

Rather, she very well may have been rushing around because she was trying to get chairs set up for the house church she financially sponsored, or finish the Sunday school lesson for the children, or organize the clothes for those who needed them, or maybe even write a short sermon. Those important activities, the work of ministry, (may have been) what had Martha in an uproar, totally discombobulated."¹

¹ <https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2019/072119.html>

So, maybe Martha was dealing with a lot of important ministry tasks, or perhaps, she was making dinner. Because, after all, someone needs to make dinner. And honestly if 13 people showed up at your house at the last minute, without warning, and needed dinner, and your sister wasn't helping, you would likely be discombobulated too.

But it doesn't really matter what Martha is doing, because another difference between the scripture and so many interpretations is that Jesus didn't dismiss the work she was doing. Jesus didn't say the work Martha was doing was the problem at all. Jesus commented on her state of mind - her worry and distraction. And honestly our English translation doesn't do what Jesus said justice. The word Jesus used for "worry" here in the Greek is not a mild word. It "could be translated as "strangle" or "seize by the throat and tear" and the root meaning of the word "distraction" is "a separation or a dragging a part of something that should be whole."² Jesus' response indicated that Martha was far more than worried and distracted but on the verge of a panic attack. Martha was experiencing a serious level of worry and distraction over the weight of tasks she had to do.

That helps me have more empathy for Martha, especially when I pay attention to two other things about this story: who Jesus was to Martha and the timing of this visit. Martha and Mary were sisters of Lazarus, and the gospel of John says Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Scripture gives the sense that Jesus was like family to them. They are very close. And this visit happened as Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus had been telling the disciples he was going to Jerusalem where he would be killed. While they didn't seem to understand that everyone must have had a foreboding sense that marching into Jerusalem, where all the powers that be were, meant they were on the precipice of something new; some kind of big change. So, Martha had a lot to do, and she was rushing around trying to do it, all the while, growing in her anxiety for this person she loved and what was to come.

This led to Jesus finding Martha in, as Debie Thomas writes, "a state of fragmentation — a condition in which she could not enjoy his company, savor his presence, find inspiration in her work, receive anything he wished to offer her, or show him genuine love. Instead, all she could do was question *his* love ("Lord, do you not care?"), fixate on herself ("*My* sister has left *me* to do all the work by *myself*") and triangulate ("Tell her then to help me.")."³

In this, I don't think Martha is alone. So many of my conversations these days involve people experiencing a lot of anxiety in life — feeling fragmented, worried, distracted. It is

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2282-only-one-thing>

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difficult to take in the breadth of all the different kinds of things to worry about – globally, nationally, locally, in our own homes. It is overwhelming to live in a world where we can see and hear about the suffering of those who live in every corner of the earth whether from war, poverty, or natural disasters. It is deeply troubling to constantly hear about the divisiveness in our nation. I hear all the time from people who don't feel they recognize our country anymore. Locally we see things we know are happening in lots of places with worries about the state of our schools, gun violence on our streets, growing numbers in need of food assistance, lack of affordable housing. Individually, we deal with financial and health worries, trouble with family relationships, and mental health issues. It's a lot.

But allowing ourselves to be swept away by worry and distraction is a dangerous path. Look at Martha again. She was so worried and distracted, so discombobulated, that it's clear she was also feeling increasingly isolated. In the moment when she meant to be offering her best and most hospitable, she instead found herself all worked up and looking for someone to blame. As a result, she found herself unable to lead with her kindness, understanding, generosity, or love. Instead, overwhelmed by all her work; fearful she wouldn't get it all done; worried people would think less of her; she focused those negative feelings on Mary. Mary began to seem lazy, unhelpful, ungrateful. Martha's distractions were piling up in a way that made her lose her focus and her purpose, but even worse, her worry and distraction caused her to develop feelings of fear and anger towards others. It wouldn't be a far step to a place where Martha might start to question why she even bothered; why she tried to be hospitable; why she should reach out in service at all. It would not be hard to find herself in a real rift with Mary and even Jesus.

Isn't that true for us, too? When we are consumed with worry and distraction, all too often we feel increasingly isolated, more and more angry, more and more convinced the world is out to get us; more sure about the line between the good guys and the bad guys; less convinced anything we can do will make a difference, so why bother trying?

Jesus doesn't just say "don't worry" - everyone knows that doesn't work. Jesus invites Martha to join Mary at his feet to listen. Not because there isn't work to be done, but because only there can we find an answer to all that worry and distraction. Only there can we heal our hearts, grow in grace and learn to love. Only there can we be connected to the bigger picture, the greater vision, the reminder that we are not alone, and we do not have to do it all, fix it all ourselves.

Jesus is calling us into a deeper contemplation so that our actions can be more focused and purposeful. In true contemplation of God's Word, we are able to find a better sense of how we can truly serve others from a place of love and generosity. Time at Jesus'

feet helps us to address our own fears, worries and struggles, and gives us a lens from which to critique our culture when we see fear and anger playing out in larger ways. That is what Mary seems to understand. Thomas writes, “Mary recognized that Jesus’s presence in her house required a radical shift. A role change. A wholehearted surrender. Every action, every decision, every priority, would have to be filtered through this new love, this new devotion, this new passion. Why? Because Jesus was no ordinary guest. He was the Guest who would be Host. The Host who would provide the bread of life, the living water, and the wine that was his own blood, to anyone who would sit at his feet and receive his hospitality.”⁴

If we want to have any hope of dealing with all the things which worry us, we must be willing to receive this hospitality from Jesus. We must be willing to take some deep breaths and listen for Jesus’ voice. We must be open to the possibility that our priorities may need to shift.

And that’s not easy, because if we take the time to come to Jesus’ feet, we also must take a break from pointing “out there” and yelling about how the sky is falling and instead focus on the work of transforming our own hearts and lives. At Jesus’ feet, we might hear Jesus tell us that all our worrying and fretting about the future is stopping us from doing the hard work of justice, forgiving our enemies and loving people well. At Jesus’ feet, we might have to make the decision to choose to believe in the possibility of God’s kingdom breaking in here on earth over all the doomsayers.

“It’s easy to lose sight of Mary. In our work-frenzied, performance-driven lives, it’s easy to believe that pondering, listening, waiting, and resting have no value. In our age of snark and cynicism, it’s easy to roll our eyes at spiritual earnestness. In a world that is profoundly broken and unjust, it’s easy to argue that we should leave contemplation to the monastics and throw all of our time and energy into social engagement. To be clear: we *are* called to work for justice. We are called to bring liberty to the oppressed and comfort to the afflicted. But every “work” we do must begin, Jesus insists, from “only one thing.” It must begin with him. It must begin at his feet.”⁵

Jesus is the one thing. The main thing. The source of all other good things. The foundation of our hope. At Jesus’ feet we find the courage, strength, patience, resilience, kindness, compassion and joy to live our lives, to follow our calling, to love each other well. It’s not either/or - do the work or sit at Jesus’ feet. It’s a both/and. But neither the work we are called to do, nor the contemplation and inspiration we will find at Jesus’ feet are possible if we are consumed by worry and distraction.

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Jesus invited Martha and invites us to lay down all the worry, the fretting, the tendency to blame and isolate, the frantic consumption of more and more things to be worried about, at his feet and to listen instead for the comfort and the challenge offered in his words; to be encouraged and inspired to go out to do the work we are called to do in this world; to find other people who will do that work with us; and to be reminded we are not alone in any of this. Amen.