

**July 21, 2019 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Genesis 18:1-10a, Psalm 15**  
**Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:38-42**

[*Overwhelmed: Work, love, and play when no one has the time*, by Brigid Schulte, page 44-45.  
Debie Thomas' piece "Only One Thing" posted on Journey with Jesus on 7-14-19.  
Steve Garnaas-Holmes' poem "One Thing Is Needed" published in Shalem Institute's 2017-2018 annual report.]

**Beloved of Christ Jesus, grace and peace from the one who comes to sit with us. Amen.**

**It's a good day to breathe deeply. Join me.**

It's a good day to take a moment to roll back our shoulders,  
to stretch our necks, to pay attention to the grace, to breathe... together.

**"Martha, Martha," Jesus says, "You are worried and distracted by many things."**

**A colleague recently** pointed me to the book by Brigid Schulte called *Overwhelmed*.

It's intriguing, maybe you've read it.

It has the subtitle: *Work, love and play when no one has the time*.

The cover is filled with chicken scratches of shopping lists (granola bars and almond butter) and to-do lists  
(dentist, Max to vet, taxes, geometry tutor).

It's a book about stress and leisure, and about our brains and our hearts, really, our souls.

It's about time and culture.

A few chapters in, Schulte interviews Ann Burnett, an NDSU professor who studies how the pace of life  
impacts our relationships, and how we communicate about this pace.

Burnett and her colleagues have studied holiday letters, the classic Christmas Card notes, thousands and  
thousands of them, and the way they've evolved over the years.

They've circled words like *hectic* and *whirlwind* and *consumed* and *crazy* and *on the run*.

Schulte writes, quoting Professor Burnett's realization, "My God, people are *competing* about being busy.

It's about showing status. That if you're busy, you're important. You're leading a full and worthy life."

Schulte then reflected, "There's a real 'busier than thou' attitude, that if you're not as busy as the Joneses,  
you'd better get cracking."

**"Martha, Martha," Jesus says, "You are worried and distracted by many things."**

Mary and Martha, Martha and Mary, these two sisters, we know them well, very well.

Talk about a Gospel passage that stirs up our baggage. Anyone?!

Talk about a passage that can press buttons:

Some people love this passage, it seems to affirm their spirituality.

Some experience it with shame and resentment.

Other are offended or angered by the interaction between Jesus and these sisters, and then conflicted by their anger.

With all this “Martha, Martha” talk, Jesus can come across as patronizing.

Goodness, the world—gees, the church—needs some Martha’s.

“Marthas” step up to make the coffee, and serve the funeral lunch, and fix the leaky toilet, and fight for immigrant dignity, and weed the garden, to keep things rolling.

So I shake my head and wonder, really, Jesus, is this exchange helpful?

**To me this passage first smacks of gender roles:**

the way the work women do has been understood, or not,

the beautiful and oft overlooked calling of hospitality.

the tensions to do it all, and the strain this places on Martha and Mary’s relationship.

All that, and then I notice that Mary has this prize seat at the feet of Jesus, listening and learning, presumably with the men, counter cultural, a radical action in itself.

We always suppose Mary chose that seat, and wanted to be sitting and listening and maybe she savored it.

Or, maybe she was filled with her own tension.

Maybe she didn’t want to listen.

Maybe she found it awkward or embarrassing or boring.

**I say all of this to name what a hard passage this is: important, yes, and hard.**

It’s not uncommon to be sitting in a meeting when someone comments about being “a Martha.”

On the one hand I appreciate the examples of discipleship that Martha and Mary offer.

It’s rare to actually have examples of the female disciples.

On the other hand, I find it conflicting, for I resist these very same binaries and the titles: Oh, she’s a Martha. They are a Mary.

My concern isn’t so much that we each have our unique personalities and spiritualities, and ways of being disciples—God knows we do.

But rather my concern is that the binaries by nature ignore the complexity,

as if we can be only one thing,

as if there aren’t seasons in our lives,

as if our multiple callings—to work,

but also to family life in all its variations,

and to the communities for which we care,  
and to the very social fabric of our world....  
as if these can't somehow form us to be coherent people with the capacity  
to worship AND serve,  
to pray AND to act.

The beloved women and men and others who were Jesus disciples must have known this complexity.  
It's not an either/or, but rather a both/and.

In our way of following, in our discipleship, we are both Mary and Martha.

Sure we may lean toward one more than the other, but thankfully we have bits of both of them.

**That gets me back** to Jesus' words, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

It gets me back to Brigid Schulte's book and Professor Burnett's study of holiday letters and how,  
breathlessly, we communicate the pace of our life.

**Can we be busy but not necessarily worried and distracted?**

I'd like to think so.

Worried and distracted, that's the problem Jesus names.

Debie Thomas points out,

"The root meaning of the word 'worry' is 'strangle' or 'seize by the throat and tear.'"

"The root meaning of the word 'distraction' is 'a separation or a dragging apart of something that should be whole.'"

"These are violent words," Debie Thomas says. "Words that wound and fracture.

States of mind that render us incoherent, divided, and un-whole."

**It's Martha's fragmentation, then, that Jesus names.**

She can't be present and fully in relationship.

She is getting sucked into triangulation with Mary.

Her tasks—even the ones as sacred as offering hospitality to her Lord—have gotten a death grip around  
her, squeezing out the joy.

Martha, Martha: Often I hear these words as scolding, many of us do.

**Could Jesus' words to Martha be heard not as criticism, but rather as invitation? ...**

Maybe they are meant to be a balm, for Jesus knows Martha well...and Jesus knows us well, too.

Could Jesus know the ache in our hearts, our seeking to be whole?

Could Jesus know the expectations we have of ourselves?

The pace and pressures?

The world's needs are so great, the challenges are so many.

Could Jesus know the resentments and yearning we carry?

When life is hectic, running to and fro,

when we're worried and distracted,

unable to breathe deeply, let alone to be present or curious or engaged,

then Jesus' invitation to Martha is as real to us:

"Dear one, you are worried and distracted by many things, there is need of only one thing."

**Steve Garnaas-Holmes is a Methodist pastor and poet.**

Let me read you his piece called: "One Thing Is Needed"

There will be the clutter and clatter of pans  
The rumble and jumble of traffic and trains  
The brambles of papers and lists and calls  
The beaten paths, the errands, the chores.

You don't have to rattle and run with them.  
You can do one thing at a time.

You can stop  
And sit at the feet of the moment,  
Pay reverent attention to whatever it is,  
And listen to the silence beneath the hum,  
And simply be  
In the presence of the Presence.

In all your doing that you surely must do,  
You still can just be.  
And your being  
Will become what you do.

In the stillness within the action  
Sits the Beloved  
Who is not distracted by many things,  
But only wants to sit awhile with you.

**Dear ones, dear friends in Christ, take a breath, a deep breath.**

In these busy days, may you hear again Jesus' invitation...for you.

May the Holy Spirit center you within the swirl.

And may God lead you to love ever more deeply and to live ever more fully. Amen.