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Today's Gospel story is about distraction and focusing on what's important.

Once again, today we have one of Luke's three-character mini-dramas, only this one is not a parable, but one of the events in the life of Jesus. I've often thought that this story was a little unfair to Martha. As the story begins, it's Martha who welcomes Jesus into her home, and it's Martha who serves Jesus. All her sister Mary does is sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him.

It seems that Martha is within her rights to complain that she's having to do all the work while Mary just sits there, but Jesus doesn't back her up. Instead he takes Mary's side in the dispute. It just doesn't seem fair. But let's take a little closer look.

First of all, Martha seems to be in charge. Mary is silent throughout this story, and their brother Lazarus doesn't even appear in Luke's version. Martha might be the oldest, or merely the bossiest, but she is the one who makes all the arrangements for Jesus' visit. She really is the hostess with the moistest. But one of the hallmarks of good hospitality is to make sure your guest is as comfortable as possible, and here Martha definitely could use a couple of tips from Miss Manners.

Have you ever been to a dinner party where the host and his or her spouse were fighting? You sit uncomfortably in the living room while there's a hissed argument going on in the kitchen. You try not to listen, but you can't help but overhear. Then, even worse, one or the other of them involves YOU in the altercation, demanding that you take sides, and you wish you could sink into the floor, or just sneak away and go to McDonald's.

So here's Jesus, a guest in Martha and Mary's home, and he's being called upon to referee between them when Martha complains to him, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

And, surprisingly, rather than remain neutral, Jesus backs up Mary, who hasn't said a word. I can just imagine Martha standing there with her mouth open at that. But once again, here is where our English translation does us a bit of a disservice. His words could be taken as a rebuke, but they could also be taken as something more gentle – an encouragement to Martha to slow down and enjoy the evening.

Have you ever been over to someone's house for dinner and the person hosting the event is frantic? You might have been met at the door and handed a vacuum cleaner because your host is running behind and just hasn't had time to get to that. Or you're told to make yourself at home, because your host has to run to the store for something crucial. Or your host is in tears because the special dish she was making just for you fell or was burnt.

Even though it's not your fault, you feel terrible and want to comfort your host and tell him or her that it's just fine – you don't mind vacuuming, or you'd be happy to run to the store, or you can easily pick off the burnt bits or send out for pizza. It's their company you're interested in, not the food or the housekeeping.

Martha is not just doing all of the work of cooking and serving Jesus. She's FRANTIC about it. It says that Martha was distracted by her many tasks, but distracted is too mild a word. The word here is p*erispaó,* which means to be distracted, but also to be greatly troubled.

Then Jesus, in answer to her demand for justice, observes that she is worried and distracted. Here he uses the words, m*erimnaó,* which is translated as over anxious and troubled and pulled in many different directions; and t*horubeo,* which is even stronger than troubled – it means panicked and terrified.

In other words, Martha is going crazy, and is unable to focus on anything that is truly important. It's not WHAT Martha is doing that's the problem, but her frantic state of mind. Mary, on the other hand, seems to understand how important it is to just sit and listen to Jesus' words and not be distracted by external things. It's not that hospitality isn't important – it is, especially in the Middle East in the first century, but not, according to Jesus, at the expense of first listening to God's word.

Michael and I have some dear friends named Victor and Lynn who, for some crazy reason, both decided to get their PhDs at the same time. And even crazier, they chose different universities to get them – she went to the University of Minnesota for her degree in Plant Genetics, and he to Iowa State, which is about three and a half hours away, for his degree in Sociology.

For nearly ten years they met up either in Minnesota or in Iowa, mostly on weekends, and somehow they made it work. Although this arrangement wasn't ideal, one definite benefit was that they weren't around most of the time to distract each other from their studies and dissertation writing. Lynn used to fondly call Victor an "attractive nuisance."

It's not that they didn't love each other and really enjoy each other's company, and it's not that their marriage wasn't important. But they realized that, for a time, there were other priorities that had to be respected in order to achieve their goals, both individually and as a couple, and that distracting each other was going to do neither of them any good in the long run. They found a way to honor both.

Jesus is not saying throw all hospitality to the wind here, and neglect important duties. What he IS saying is that being overly concerned with the distractions of the world – even those that are considered to be good and valuable things, like hospitality – at the expense of listening to God is not the best path to take. And it's up to us to make the conscious choice to find balance.

Our lives are filled with distractions that take us away from God and if we don't choose otherwise, the distractions always win. Jesus tells Martha that she only needs one thing – the thing that Mary has chosen and "which will not be taken from her" – the Word of God. Or in other words, Jesus, himself. Everything else will pass away, but God's word is eternal and that's what we need to focus on.

Mary had the right of it, Jesus said. By saying nothing, and by taking the time to quietly listen to God, she chose the right path. We need to consciously choose to shut off the noise and the distraction. But it's so easy to be Martha! It's so easy to be panic-stricken and race around like a chicken with its head cut off.

Even if we're doing things for God, we can get waylaid and distracted. In our own little corner of the Church, there is a lot of argument and fuss about some things that important to some people, but in the grand scheme of things really don't matter that much. There's a lot of shouting going on, and not a lot of listening - not to each other and especially not to God.

When Michael and I were in New York, we used to look forward to unlocking the gate to our school enclave and escaping inside where it was QUIET. We were so lucky to have a place like that, in the middle of the busiest, noisiest city in the country, where we could tune out the world for a while. Where we could listen to God and actually hear what he had to say to us.

One of the ideas our Stewardship Committee has come up with, which I think is just fabulous, is a weekly quiet night here at Grace. We don't have all the details worked out yet, but one evening a week, probably a Wednesday, the church will be open for an hour for anyone to come in and just be still and listen to God. There won't be any formal prayer or service during that time, though we may conclude with Compline after the hour is up.

I encourage all of us to take this opportunity to leave Martha at home, and just be Mary for awhile. I think we'll all find that God has some amazing things to say to us, if we are willing to sit at his feet and listen without distraction.

Amen