

Choosing the Better Part

by

The Reverend Brian K. Ballard
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 18:1-10a

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰ Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus’s 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. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

When I was in seminary, I spent one summer interning at a local church. Throughout my time there I got to do a little bit of everything. I preached twice, officiated my first graveside service, helped lead the youth mission trip, and was cast in the church's Vacation Bible Camp. Since coming here I have been pleased to be part of VBC each year, but I have been grateful to not be cast in the same role that I was cast in back then: the role of the Messiah himself, Jesus. Maybe it was because I was the seminary intern, or perhaps it was because I was taller than the kids, or maybe it was simply because I was a guy, but whatever the reason I got to play the role of Jesus. No pressure.

On Wednesday of that particular VBC week, we explored the story I just read from Luke's gospel. I remember sitting up front on their chancel steps, dressed in faux traditional first century Jewish garb – a mixture of 1970s hippie and Arabian Nights. Sitting directly in front of me was “Mary,” played by 8-year-old Lacey who assured everyone she met that she could be super focused on Jesus; a trait she carried out by staring at me without blinking. “Martha” – played by a 10-year-old girl named Eustacia – was pacing: up and down the aisle, back behind the chancel, clamoring pots and plates against the communion table. As the story goes, eventually Martha came up to me (Jesus) looking breathless and exasperated, “Jesus, do you not care that Mary has left me to do all the work by myself?” she droned, “Tell her then to help me.” Having prepared all week for my line I responded with my “Jesus voice” in a cadence reminiscent of the Brady Bunch, “Martha, Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” In our telling, Martha then had an epiphany, forsook all her chores, sat down, and listened alongside her sister. The end. Que the applause.

As I returned to my seat, a six-year-old in the pew in front of me lifted himself up to turn around and face me. “Jesus,” he said, “does this mean I do not have to do my chores?”

Leave it to a child to get to the heart of the story. In his defense, though, he was right. This was the message we communicated: sitting before Jesus: good; doing chores: bad. Mary was in the right for sitting and listening to Jesus. Martha was in the wrong for being too busy with her many tasks. It's a simplistic dichotomy that seems accurate enough at first glance; easy enough for children to understand. Yet, over time I have come to believe this is not the message Jesus was trying to communicate. Instead, I think Jesus is trying to tell Martha and us something about paying attention in a busy world; about how easy it is to be so worried and distracted that we miss the divine all around us, even when God is sitting in our living room.

One of the reasons I think this is because all throughout scripture we find examples of faithful people carrying out tasks for God. People are often busy on God's behalf, and they are rewarded for doing so. Abraham is one such person. In the story Leigh read, Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. Picture what it will be like later today at about 2pm. Abraham is worn out by the heat, and he has sat down to take a break until it cools off a bit. At that very moment Abraham looks up and he sees. He sees three men and he immediately runs to them – in the midst of the heat – he drops in front of their feet and begs them to stay, offering a litany of all the tasks he will perform if they remain: he will bring water and food, he will wash their feet and provide them refreshment. The moment they agree, Abraham goes and performs tasks even more lavish than he promised: asking his wife Sarah to make choice cakes, while he prepares the best calf. Why does Abraham do all this? The story begins with five key words, “The Lord appeared to Abraham...”, and Abraham was paying attention and saw God. Abraham looks up, sees, and recognizes the Lord in the three guests, and no amount of heat nor sun nor exhaustion will keep him from serving God immediately. He goes and does.

Now you may be wondering, “how is Abraham any different from Martha? He's running around and performing a lot of tasks just like she was. How do we know God was pleased with him when Jesus rebuked

Martha?” Good question. The end of this story about Abraham gives us a clue: one of the guests says to Abraham, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” A son. The larger story in scripture about Abraham is the story of God creating a great nation through him, of blessing him with descendants beyond number. Yet, for a long time Abraham is without a son, and without much hope that God’s promise will come true. Now, in this encounter, God has come close and said to Abraham, “get ready, it’s about to happen.”

I believe Abraham heard that message because he was paying attention and looking for God in his life. The blessing of a son is not a reward for the tasks he did, no Abraham performed those tasks because he saw that God was right in front of him. The message comes because Abraham has eyes to see God and ears to hear what God had to say. This is the difference between Abraham and Martha. Yes, like Abraham, Martha is busy with many tasks, but hear the words Jesus says to her, “Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things...” – Jesus wants Martha’s attention. Abraham does his tasks because he knows God is present in his home. Martha is worried and distracted, which prevent her from noticing God is in her midst. God is speaking to Martha, but she is so distracted she cannot hear what is being said.

My friends, paying attention is one of the great challenges of our lifetime. Our focus is a sought-after commodity. Back in the 1970s it was estimated that the average American saw between 500 and 1600 advertisements each day. In 2022 that number has risen to between 6,000 and 10,000 advertisements each day. In a related study, over half of the people surveyed said that advertising was “out of their control.” Meaning, their attention was being taken from them, and they believed there was nothing they could do to change it. Paying attention has never been harder, and yet it is fundamental to the life of faith. If we do not pay attention then we will fail to see God at work in this world. What’s more, we will fail to hear the invitation God extends to every single one of us. An invitation to sit, listen, learn, and do.

Earlier this week I saw an image that seized my attention. It was the first published image taken by the new NASA James Webb Space Telescope. Some of you may have seen it as well. As I understand it, this telescope is able to look into deep space, back in time, to the early formation of galaxies. The first image released captured a galaxy cluster as it appeared 4.6 billion years ago. It's an awe-inspiring image, with myriad shades of color, various bursts of sparkle, and brilliant shine. There are so many specs and marks you cannot count them all, each one representing a galaxy as it appeared billions of years ago. As I read more about the image, one sentence stood out to me. It read, "This slice of the vast universe is approximately the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length by someone on the ground." A grain of sand held at arm's length. All that appeared in the image, the countless stars, planets, galaxies, all of it was contained in the comparative size of a grain of sand held at arm's length. How did anyone notice something so small? And, how did something so small, so imperceptible, contain something so vast and so beautiful?

Church, I believe there is far more going on around us than we often observe. I believe God is always at work, in big ways and small ways, in ways vast and beautiful, sometimes even right in front of us. And when we pay attention, when we really look for God, we can block out the advertisements and noise, and we can see things that often go unnoticed, things that God sees and wants us to see as well.

We can see behind the heavy-laden eyes of the barista at Starbucks, working a second shift so she can afford to live in a community with good schools for her daughter. I've seen her.

We can hear the pained words of our neighbor, saying how much his spouse loved the summer and how he cannot believe it's already been two years. I've seen him.

We can notice the cries of teenagers, wondering, is this a place where they can belong, where they can be themselves? I've seen them.

We can encounter God walking down the street, calling all who are lost and sick and grieving to come and find rest. I've seen it.

But friends, I must warn you: seeing what God wants us to see – these things, these people, God incarnate – will change you. You cannot see the strain on a barista's face and not be compassionate toward her. You cannot hear the pain behind the words of your widowed neighbor and not invite him to tell you more about the person he so loved. You cannot witness tears fall down the cheeks of a beloved child, tears shed out of fear for not being accepted for who they are, and not want to welcome them with a hug. You cannot encounter God on the street and not want to follow in those footsteps. When you have eyes to see you will be compelled to act.

I think this is what Jesus is trying to tell Martha and us. He's acknowledging we are really good at doing things, but lamenting that often they do not serve the higher purpose to which we have been called. Sometimes God is right in front of us and we are too worried and distracted by every other thing to notice. Jesus says there is only one thing we need. And then, Jesus invites us to follow Mary's example and choose "the better part." The "better part" is the part that notices when Jesus is speaking, that sees where God is at work, and responds faithfully. Abraham did: a man who was worn out from a hot summer day, he paid attention to the people crossing his path and ended up hearing the long-hoped for blessing from the Lord. Mary did: she recognized who was in her home and she sat down on the floor for a front row seat to hear his teachings. Sometimes choosing the "better part" means we must sit and listen. Other times choosing the better part means we must rise, go and do. Always, choosing the better part means paying attention to the movement of God that is happening right now in front of our very eyes.

To go back to that VBC skit. I portrayed Jesus incorrectly that day. The message was not about chores being bad, and sitting being good.

Rather than picturing Jesus whining, “Martha, Martha, Martha,” may we imagine Jesus waving Martha over, giving her a hug, speaking to her in a tone of compassion and attention, “Martha, Martha” – I see you but you do not see me. You are doing so much that you’ve lost focus. Take a breath, have a seat, and look: God is here. Choose the better part. May we do likewise. Amen.