



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI



“Christ in the House of Mary and Martha”  
Vincenzo Campi (c. 1536–1591)

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**“Distracted”**  
*(Luke 10:38-42)*  
Rev. David K. Groth

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

July 21, 2013

## **Collect of the Day**

O Lord, grant us the Spirit to hear Your Word and know the one thing needful that by Your Word and Spirit we may live according to Your will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

*38 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42 but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)*

Martha and Mary were surprised to have out of town guests knocking on their door, but that's the way it often happened 2,000 years ago. In the age before cell phones, Google and Twitter, traveling friends just showed up at the door. Martha and Mary are delighted to see Jesus and the disciples, but it does shuffle the agenda and call for flexibility.

After the initial greetings, they begin to settle in. Martha scurries off into the kitchen area. She's done this sort of thing before. No new dishes today; too risky, too time consuming. She's going to pull out the old faithfuls, those reliable, satisfying dishes she knows well. In a matter of seconds, she has cleared a work space and is pulling together the ingredients. She moves briskly, efficiently. She enjoys the work and does it well. And she thinks she can keep half an ear on the goings on while she works.

Mary, on the other hand, lingers behind with Jesus. She sits at the Lord's feet, almost like a disciple. Jesus can't help himself. So long as some are willing to listen, he's willing to teach. And Mary absorbs it all. She's focused, engaged, attentive.

From the kitchen Martha steals a glance, and notices Mary sitting there. From Martha's perspective Mary looks idle and unproductive. It's not really a big deal and she doesn't want to make it one. Yet, there is this meal to prepare, and there's clutter to pick up. Is Mary content to let Jesus see their normal, untidy lives?

Somehow Mary isn't really concerned about all that; doesn't even see it. That's the ongoing fault Martha has with her sister. Mary just doesn't seem to pull her weight around the house. She's laid back . . . people oriented is the nice way to say it, rather than task oriented.

Jesus too just keeps talking. . . oblivious to all Martha is doing, and the other blokes are just sitting around being spiritual, but useless in the kitchen. Not a thank you among them nor an offer to help chop. Does no one notice? Must she be everyone's servant? Will she also be stuck with the dishes?

She tries to catch Mary's eye, but Mary is annoyingly focused and attentive. Martha decides she'll just give Mary a little nudge, a gentle hint. She doesn't want to make a scene, but there's much to do and it would be satisfying to see Mary get off her heine. She opens her mouth to say just a few words, "Mary, can you give me a hand?" But the words don't come out that way and they're not even directed at Mary. She finds herself rebuking him. "Teacher, don't you care that my sister has left all the work to me? Tell her to help me!" Martha too is surprised by the lump in her throat and the anger in her heart.

Awkward silence. No one is sure of what to say. Martha's guests are a little embarrassed for her. Jesus breaks the silence. "Martha, Martha" he says, lovingly, not unkindly. "You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the good portion" he says. Then, firmly, "and it will **not** be taken from her."

My mom has never liked this text. Martha works

and Mary dreams and yet it's Martha who gets rebuked. That seems unfair . . . perhaps because we are all Marthas.

Take another look at the bulletin cover. It's entitled "Christ in the House of Mary and Martha" and is an oil painting by a 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist named Vincenzo Campi. Look at Martha's face. Does she look angry to you? I don't think so either! In fact, she's rather pleased. She's in her element. By golly she's intent on preparing all that . . . and she thinks she can!

But just look at all the groceries. There are apples and oranges, grapes and cherries, tomatoes and melons. There are four heads of cabbage, a number of loaves of bread, a veritable school of fish. The artist makes our Thanksgiving feast look like a Southwest Airlines peanut snack! There are a couple of geese, a number of ducks, a chicken that's been plucked and trussed for the oven. Her ovens must have been big commercial things from Wolff Appliance. In the lower left there's a lobster and in the upper left there's a pig for good measure. I think Campi is teasing us a little because Martha would never have had a lobster nor a pig in her kosher household. I think the artist is also begging the question: might Martha be expecting too much of herself. . . and too much of her guests. Could Jesus and the twelve possibly eat all that? These things are all good, but are they all necessary?

Again, the title is "Christ in the House of Mary and Martha." Based on the title you would think Christ is front and center, but he's not. It's mostly Martha. In fact, you can hardly see Jesus, but he's in there . . . just to the right of the chicken, in the background. The artist is preaching to us, isn't he? The greater our distractions, the smaller Jesus becomes. "Christ in the House of Mary and Martha. The subject is nearly crowded out of the picture altogether.

The point is, unbelief can reject and belittle Jesus, but so too can busyness. The more preoccupied we are, the more remote Jesus is. When every moment

is filled, the soul soon becomes empty. And just as the consequences of distracted driving can be devastating, so also can the consequences of distracted living. Like Martha, we all think we can handle the many distractions in this hurried life. We like to think we are masters of multi-tasking, but we're not.

Clifford Nass teaches psychology at Stanford University and the main conclusion of his current research is that the human mind was not designed to multitask. Multitasking, says Nass, is a weakness, not a strength. It actually wastes more time than it saves, and there's much evidence that it is killing our concentration and our creativity. Many college students think, for example, that they can write a term paper while also listening to music, Facebooking and texting. But they cannot, at least, not very well. And it's been proven again and again that those who multitask the most are, surprisingly, the worst at multitasking. They cannot filter out irrelevancy. Their memory is eroded. They are emotionally impaired. They are, in the words of Dr. Nass, "mental wrecks". They all think they can shut if off and become laser focused when they want, but they cannot.

Here's my point: this is as much a spiritual issue as it is a cognitive one. When we become so busy, so distracted, Jesus is nearly pushed out of the picture. In fact, theologians talk of "the atheism of distraction." It's not that they are militant unbelievers, card carrying members of "The Freedom From Religion" club. No, it's just that they are so distracted that for all practical purposes, they are atheists. Jesus is buried by the minutia. He becomes the needle in our haystack. He says to us "One thing is needed" but we can have a hard time filtering out irrelevancy.

Mary chose the better portion. She chose to block out all the other distractions and zero in on God's Son and listen to his Word.

By her attentive hearing Mary made the seat of Jesus a pulpit, and her humble place at his feet a pew,

and the whole room a chapel, a sanctuary where God himself was present for his people. You know, you can do that too. There's a fellow at SNAP Fitness who always reads his daily devotional while on the Treadmill. With all that bouncing around I don't know how he can do it, but reading the Word there for him turns that space into a holy space. Similarly, I had a professor at the seminary who begged us to keep a Greek New Testament *in the bathroom*, turning profane space into sacred space!

I get dozens of emails every day and you probably do too. Emails, social media ... this is all horizontal, people to people, and if we're not careful it can smother the vertical – God speaking to you in his Word. So one of my professors suggested we read a lesson fifteen times, slowly, before even bothering to read what others have written about the text. Close the door. Don't open any e-mails or answer any texts and read it fifteen times, letting the Holy Spirit breathe His Word into you.

“Martha, Martha, you are troubled about many things, but only one thing is necessary.” Last week, we heard of the lawyer asking Jesus which of the commandments he really needed to keep. He wanted to quibble about who really constitutes a neighbor. He wanted to establish boundaries and limits. And Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan which teaches the neighbor is anyone in need whose life intersects with yours. So, to this lawyer, Jesus is saying, “Go and do.” That's his prescription for this man, and it would be his prescription for some of us. Don't just sit there all the time . . . and quibble. Do something! Roll up your sleeves and get to work.

To Martha, and to some of us, the Lord has an entirely different prescription. Sit down, listen and learn. Your life is so full that there's hardly any room for the Word of God. That's your problem. Own it, and make room for God's Word.

Theologian Fred Craddock writes, “If we censure

Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be Yes” (*Luke*, 152). God needs his Marys and his Marthas too and he needs them both from you.

Finally, Martha sees Jesus as too much the recipient, and too little the Giver of all things; too much the object of her service, and too little the great Host who would serve us all. After all, our Lord is the Lord who serves. He came into the flesh not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. On the cross he offered himself as a spotless sacrifice for the sin of the whole world, the sin of the Marthas who work themselves into vexation . . . the sin of the Marys who forget to serve. Through his perfect life and death, he accomplished forgiveness and salvation for all before the Father in heaven. Seated now at the Father’s right hand, he graciously serves his Church with the gifts of salvation. On the Last Day, he will come again to gather his elect from every nation to celebrate the feast that will have no end, the feast he has prepared for us, the feast where he is the host and we the guests. Our Lord is the Lord who serves us, far more than we could ever hope to serve him. Amen.

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