

“The Better Part” Rev. Michele Ward July 21, 2019
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

Luke 10: 38-42 (NRSV)

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’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 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

One of the tropes in this story is that Mary chose the better part--sitting at the feet of Jesus. And her sister, Martha, chose the lesser part because she was busy at work. But this encounter is way more complicated than our gender biases and the NRSV translation allows. Today we’ll get reacquainted with the person I consider to be the mother of all deacons, Martha. Often, deacons are jokingly referred to as the “no one else wants to do it” committee. Or, they are relegated to “casseroles and greeting cards” committee. Celebrations matter. Food matters. But so does acknowledging our deacons and the work that they commit to doing when they say yes to joining with other deacons in the powerful ministry of presence here at Brown.

The Book of Order gives us a powerful and challenging definition of the function of the deacon. A deacon in the Presbyterian Church (USA) is meant to do these kinds of tasks, not the tasks no one else wants to do: acts of “compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress.”¹ What an incredibly powerful charge deacons have. We commission them to be the ones on the front end of social justice action, ministering to others and taking risks in living rooms, hospitals, and on street corners. And today we’re also going to have a little Greek lesson because the words that we use matter-- especially the words we use to describe the work of the church and the work of our very lives.

¹ *The Book of Order*, (G-2.0201).

The Greek word used in v. 40 & 41 to describe the work of Martha--*diakonia*--is a word with multiple definitions, but most commonly translates into the word “ministry.” Guess what? This word is used multiple times in Luke, in Acts, and in the epistles. It is the word that we use for modern deacons today. Most of the time, the translators use the word service, tasks, or preparations to describe what Martha is doing, rather than the word ministry. I’m going to read this story to you replacing a few of the words. Let’s see how it lands on your ears and in your hearts this time.

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40 But Martha was distracted by her many **ministries**; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the **ministry** 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 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part [**of ministry**], which will not be taken away from her.”

Martha’s house is the first place they visit after Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to the lawyer challenging Jesus. It is, in fact, the same chapter we were in earlier when Jesus tells the disciples to travel lightly and receive hospitality. Now, Jesus is following his own advice and receiving the hospitality of Martha. He enters her home, and she provides space for him and his community. Martha welcomes him, a stranger, into her home. Martha practices the ministry of hospitality and welcome of the stranger here. Mary, Martha’s sister, sits down at the feet of this stranger, this guest, and listens to him share his stories and his teachings. She practices another aspect of ministry here--the ministry of presence. An underestimated, unquantifiable ministry. But it matters. It matters because we each have a presence to give and we each have a presence to receive. Will you each take the invitation to slow down and see, slow down and listen, slow down and love?

Nowhere does the passage mention a kitchen, a mop, a ‘woman’s work’ to distract Martha. We can safely assume that Jesus was not the only guest in their house at this moment nor would he be the last. We can also safely assume that Martha was busy about many ministries--like the kind named above in *The Book of Order*. She, in her busy state, sees her sister practicing ministry, but does not think of it that way. She sees

her sister practicing presence, and assumes she is abandoning Martha to take care of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger on her own. Martha is angry. She is carrying the burden of her vulnerable siblings, and she is tired. She needs someone to come alongside her. Martha's issue is one of erasure. Her ministry leaves her invisible and overstretched. She sees that she is the one doing all the work by herself and, possibly, she has not asked for help. We do not know the conversations happening between Martha and Mary before this moment. Maybe Mary needs a break. Perhaps she, too, has been caring for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger alongside her sister. And, perhaps she wants a turn to extend the welcome beyond the creaturely ministry of food in bellies and a dry place to sleep. We do not know the content of their conversation. But whatever it was, it must have been important enough for Mary to stop whatever she was doing and listen. Ministry means slowing down sometimes. Ministry means paying attention to the people around us. Not only do the to do lists that need accomplishing, but tending to the hearts of people needs to happen, too.

Jesus tells Martha that her ministries distract her from being present. That her rushing around and staying busy with the work of ministry keeps her from seeing what is right in front of her: an opportunity to dwell in the presence of the Messiah and receive. Mary has figured this out. Mary sits and dwells. Well, Jesus, there is much distracting Martha right now. Hungry children, women abandoned by their families, people experiencing incurable diseases, the consistent knocks on her door. The more she opens the door, the more people come. How can she say no to their faces, to their stories, to the God who shows up at her doorstep, the one wearing no shoes and looking a bit ragged?

But Jesus tells her that Mary has chosen the better portion of ministry--the learning and dwelling side of it. This is disconcerting. Luke seems to laud Martha's original impulse to invite Jesus into her home as he prepares to head to Jerusalem towards his death. But now, he directly says that she chose the lesser part of ministry because she was too preoccupied with caring for others and accomplishing tasks. If she had not slowed down enough to hear Jesus at the door or see him coming up the road, Jesus never would have made it inside of her home in the first place. Martha chose the better part by practicing hospitality in her home. But she does not slow down enough.

What I don't like about the implication here is the spiritual whiplash of Martha receiving praise and correction in the same passage. The translators of this passage do not seem to understand the importance of her role in her community, belittling her ministry and calling them tasks. They do not understand the power of her welcome and the role that the two sisters play as a ministry team. And Luke doesn't even bother to

credential them by telling us the name of their town in this story. You would think this story was written down just so women would sit down and listen to men talk.

So, was it? I don't think so. I think both Martha and Mary are asking us to see them differently today. Can you wipe away the image you have of them and encounter them anew this morning? The better part is not sitting down and shutting up. The better part is not a flurry of activity that leaves us exhausted and resentful. The better part is ministering from a place of fullness. The better part is service on behalf of others without sacrificing our personhood or wellbeing. The better part is believing in the power of what *The Book of Order* tells us deacons do: deacons are the ones opening the doors, like Martha did. They are the ones letting in the people wearing no shoes and looking like something the cat dragged in.

Martha and Mary embody this list: "compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress."² The deacons are not the only ones that have this calling. We are all deacons in our own way. God invites each and every one of us into the ministry of compassion, the ministry of service, the ministry of witness. God invites each and every one of us to share the love of Jesus Christ for the visibly and invisibly vulnerable. Not all of us show our need. Some of us hide ours quite easily. Whatever our needs, whatever our vulnerabilities, God asks each of us to choose the better part. To choose welcome. To choose presence. To choose love. Amen.

² *The Book of Order*, (G-2.0201).