

Distracted by Duty

Fred Craddock once said the task of the biblical preacher is clear. It is to move, with the hearers, into a text of scripture in such a way that the biblical story becomes our story; and then come back to our own time and place, bringing with us something of value for the living of our lives. The task is clear; but not easy.

Sometimes the text is difficult, especially in our language: vague references to events and people in a time long ago; strange imagery; bizarre symbolism.

At other times the problem is not strangeness, but familiarity. We recognize the words and anticipate the meaning and application—remembering bits and pieces of past sermons and lessons, lyrics from hymns and camp songs. We've heard it before, and it's difficult to clear the attic—to restack the scattered pieces of memory and sweep away the cobwebs in preparation for a fresh reading: new, as if for the first time. Such is the case with today's text from Luke:

(LUKE 10:38-42 NRSV) *Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But 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." ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

Perhaps we can move into the text through the living room and kitchen of the house where I grew up—about 10:30 Christmas morning. The living room is cluttered with the residue of the morning ritual: bits and pieces of wrapping paper and bows littering the carpet; cousins scattered through the house: each lost in his or her own fantasy world—one with a doll house; another running a plastic race car into the furniture; two toddlers playing tug-of-war with a Tonka truck, both yelling, "Mine!" "Mine!". Another watching, not so patiently, as Daddy assembles a tricycle.

The men are in the living room. There's a football game on TV, although the conversation is about carburetors and intake manifolds.

And, guess where the women are? [Oh? You were there that year?]

Suppose an aunt has joined the guys in front of the TV. The matron of the house comes to the door, and says, rather pointedly, "We could use some help in the kitchen, Mary. Everybody needs to pitch in."

And suppose an uncle—a guest for the holiday—responds, "Oh, Martha, let her be. She's having a good time. We don't need all that food, anyway."

How rude! How put-down-ish. It lacks appreciation! I can hear the response, muttered under the breath: "Here I slave all day in a hot kitchen and look at the thanks I get." And the response is justified!

At first glance, isn't that what Jesus did? Read the text again: "*Martha, Martha,*" the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Can you imagine anyone else saying that, and getting away with it? After all, it was Martha's house! And somebody had to do the work. Meals don't cook themselves; and there are guests in the house.

The text says Martha was "distracted" by her many tasks. Distracted. In the original language, literally: "to be dragged away". Martha was "dragged away" by her many tasks. The suggestion is what we call "busy work."

The text doesn't say what she was doing; in fact, there are many unspoken expectations implied: expectations possibly of first century patriarchal society regarding the role of women, or expectations related to ancient middle eastern codes of hospitality. The text doesn't say.

Maybe Martha was present, and heard Jesus when he was teaching, "*Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (MATTHEW 5:48). And maybe she misunderstood those words, as we so often do.

"Be perfect." Our misunderstanding is compounded by our competitive, achievement-oriented society (one reason our society leads the world in mental illness.) "Be perfect!" But, by which definition of perfect?

In our culture, "be perfect" sometimes means, "Don't ever admit you *need* anything," because to *need* is to be weak and vulnerable—or irresponsible and lazy. At other times it means, "Never make a mistake!" [That's the one that gets me, because I make so many of them!] In this commandment mentality, mistakes indicate incompetence and a lack of dependability.

Sometimes, "Be perfect" means, "Have answers to all the problems anyone around you may experience." No one near you should be unhappy, for you (being perfect) must be able to make them happy. In fact, you (being perfect) should be able to "fix" everybody's problems so everybody's happy.

The stack gets pretty high. It breeds feelings of guilt and inadequacy, it creates super achievers, super losers... the expectations of society. And it's important for us to be aware of the expectations we inflict upon ourselves—to the extent that our own sense of duty becomes "distracting". Where do those self-inflicted expectations originate? Are they rooted in issues of self-justification (What will everybody think?) Or, sometimes work can be a form of avoidance. Busy-ness is a handy way of avoiding some things [like intimacy]: I've got too much to do.

The English word, "perfect" is the unfortunate choice of the Elizabethan Puritans who translated the King James Bible, and it has stuck, in most other translations since 1611. The word Luke reports on Jesus' lips didn't mean "perfect" as we use that

word. It meant "complete", or "whole. It's the word Jesus spoke on the cross: "It is finished." It implies being what God created us to be: tender, compassionate, kind, meek, loving—toward ourselves as well as toward others.

"Be perfect," in our *culture*, is a *driver*, compelling us through life like a bullet. Richard Hamm, former *GMP*, writes:

"For all our talk about God's amazing grace, most of us believe we can be saved only if we work, work, work; do, do, do. We believe deep down inside that work equals worth. Now, work is a gift of God, and it is to be celebrated: but not as an avenue to salvation or justification, because it isn't. Work is to be celebrated as a way of expressing our true identity, and as a way of serving God."

The text says Martha was "distracted"; then, Jesus says she's "worried and upset about many things." What things? The implication in Jesus' gentle rebuke is that whatever Martha was doing, it was not "needed." Jesus said to Martha, "*Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part; and it will not be taken from her.*"

Of course, meals must be cooked, floors swept, diapers changed, school work done, even sermons prepared—whether we feel like it or not. Sometimes friends and family who could and should help, won't. Life can be hard and people unfair; demands on our time and energy can seem crushing. *But too often we create our own distractions out of our need to justify ourselves—our need for recognition and acceptance.*

In those moments, what we most need is to hear is a word of grace that reassures us that we don't need to prove anything to anybody. Paul Tillich describes that experience like this:

"Grace strikes us when ... our disgust for our own being—our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and lack of direction become intolerable. It strikes us when, year after year we resolve to spend more time with family or with self and watch those resolutions go down in flames...

"Sometimes in those moments a light breaks into our darkness as if a voice were saying, "You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of whom you do not know." Don't ask for the name now; maybe you'll find it later. Don't try to do anything now; maybe later you'll do much. Don't seek for anything, don't perform anything, don't intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted."

What if Jesus' words to Martha were not a rebuke at all? What if they were an invitation to recognize the difference between true duty and self-justifying busy work, and to accept the fact that she is accepted, and therefore acceptable—"as is."

The busy-ness we create in moments of self-doubt, when we feel so useless and unacceptable... that busy-ness—and all the byproducts of it—will pass away, leaving us still feeling empty and isolated; but moments with each other, and moments with the Lord are moments that endure: moments that will sustain us.