

Making Choices
Luke 10: 38-42

This month, our lessons are reminding us how to express welcome and hospitality to others. Technologist Linda Stone has perfectly described the internet age in which we live: she calls it the age of “continuous partial attention.” As I’m driving from home to church each day, I have always seen at least one person texting and driving. (Mary Ann broke me of that habit!) Back before the pandemic when we used to go to restaurants for dinner, even she and I were guilty of bringing our phones into restaurants and checking them; our children do that when they eat with us too. Also, our grandchildren often have a game to play on a phone or tablet. New York Times author Thomas Friedman once wrote about “being driven by cab from Charles de Gaulle airport to Paris. During the one-hour trip, he and the driver had done six things: the driver had driven the cab, talked on his cellphone, and watched a video (which was a little nerve-wracking!), whereas [Friedman] had been riding, working on a column on his laptop, and listening to his I-Pod. [Said Friedman] “There was only one thing we never did: talk to each other.” Some people believe they can easily do two things at once. They may believe that, but John Medina, author of *Brain Rules*, says what actually happens is that our brain rapidly shifts attention from one thing to another, not doing either task as well as a concentrated effort. There will be some among you who will disagree with that claim from Medina—a developmental molecular biologist and research consultant. You’ll say you can pay attention to doing two things at once. If one activity is supposed to be listening, if you are doing it while doing something else you will seem distracted. So many people want someone to hear their stories, their issues, or their pain. A professor at a seminar about active listening brought in an advertisement from a newspaper. The ad said: “For \$50, I will listen to you, in person, for one hour without interruption or comment.” His phone rang off the hook as he made appointments just to listen!

People are hungry to have people pay attention to their thoughts, their concerns, and their needs. So today we zip back to a town called Bethany outside of Jerusalem over two thousand years ago. No internet; no electronics. But the issues regarding human nature were still there. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke there is only one mention of Mary and Martha, and this is it. In John's gospel we learn that they had a brother named Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. Jesus and his friends would apparently feel welcomed when they stopped in Bethany, instead of in Jerusalem where someone might report their presence. Luke says Jesus entered, "A certain village" but we know it was Bethany. We also notice that it was *Martha* who welcomed him into their home. Pay attention to what she does to show hospitality. Mary and Martha were sisters and so they were both hosting Jesus, a friend, but out of honor, they called him Lord. Martha is being the consummate hostess, and her sister is just sitting at Jesus' feet. I have seen this scenario before; maybe you have too. My grandmother's husband died when my father was 4 years old, so her sister—a single schoolteacher—came to live with her to help rear (as they called it in Georgia) my father and his brother. After my father was grown, married, and had 4 children with my mother, we would travel in the summertime to visit them. My grandmother was the Martha: she did a lot to prepare the house; and she cooked dinner—often our favorite: fried chicken in her black skillet! She did much of the work. And what did her sister do? She sat with us: teaching us games, telling us stories, and asking us about our lives. She was a great listener! But she got in trouble by "not helping." In that scenario we grew closer to her; to this day we remember the games she taught us, and I have passed some on to my grandsons. She was not lazy. She loved to fish and to read. But she wanted a relationship with us.

Apparently, Jesus needed a listener one day. Certainly, the hospitality that Martha offered was appreciated and needed. But could it be that something was on our

Lord's mind that he wanted to share? Immediately after his visit he taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer and denounced Pharisees. Unlike most of us, he also knew that his time on earth was short. As I have visited people in Hospice settings, things are different than in the world. In Hospice settings, a person has been told his or her time on earth has a shorter timeline than usual: a few days, a few weeks, or a few months. When people are in that situation, unless they are medicated so they have trouble speaking, they want to tell their family and friends things that are important to them. Fond memories, instructions on how to handle their estate, things like that. One time when my other grandmother—my mother's mother—was still healthy, she brought my sister and me into her living room. She was in her chair, and we were both were sitting cross legged on the floor by her. She said, "I would like each of you to pick out things that I have that you would enjoy having after I am gone." "Don't talk like that" we both said, almost at the same time. "No, I mean it" my grandmother said. It would give me a lot of joy to know that something I have would bring you happiness." So I pointed to a bookcase I always loved," and my sister pointed to another piece of furniture. "Get a piece of paper, write your name on it, and tape it on the bottom." My sister did that, and I did too. I now have that bookcase and treasure it; and my grandmother got joy and peace by having us sit at her feet, listen to her, and answer her question. My grandmother could absolutely be a Martha: she was a wonderful hostess. But that day—at that particular time, she needed my sister and me to be like Mary.

Jesus, that particular day, needed a friend more than a hostess. Some days we need that. Some days we are just hungry to say things that matter- things like telling someone that you love them; things like telling the news you just got from a doctor's visit; things like expressing fear over a medical diagnosis. Sometimes we need someone to listen! And sometimes we want a person to be totally present when

unexpected tears flow. Jesus once said: “We do not live by bread alone.” *On that day, it was not a growling stomach that was his focus; it was sharing something pressing with his friends.* And it turned into a conversation that reminds me of the words from Ecclesiastes: “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under Heaven.” Fixing the food was the normal thing for women in the Bible to do to welcome guests. But on one particular day, Jesus wanted to talk more than he wanted to eat. Every other day, Martha was doing the expected and appreciated thing. But there are times to just sit at someone’s feet and hear the other person’s hopes about where beloved pieces of furniture should go when she was gone; or to sit next to nieces and nephews, listening carefully to them- hearing about our lives-and teaching them games while the aroma of fried chicken filled the house as her sister made it.

How are your listening skills? People so value being heard by someone they cherish or appreciate. And after a dreadful diagnosis, or after being bullied or teased at school, or after joyous or unfortunate news about a pregnancy, people need someone they trust to listen; to listen without judgment; to gently offer a willingness to be with them. The one who is sick might need someone to lean on. Someone who is very ill might need a friend or spouse to take the journey with them to the valley of the shadow of death. Dishes can wait when someone just needs good listeners.

I am grateful for when people in my life are like Martha: taking care of tasks. I can be like Martha most of my days. Sometimes I’d rather do dishes than visit! But other days, when I can tell that someone is troubled, I can listen like Mary; fully listening, and if appropriate, deciding together how to be a support.

One final thought, The Rev Cynthia Jarvis was the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania where I asked permission to preside over the wedding of our son Chris to Amanda. She has written about this passage and made an analogy to church life that I think is worth sharing. Here is what she wrote:

A church that has been led to be “worried and distracted by many things” inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shallows of frantic potlucks, anxious stewardship campaigns, and events designed simply to perpetuate the institution. Decisions will be made in meetings without a hint of God’s reign. Food and drink will appear at table without Christ being recognized in the breaking of the bread. [*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010, p.264.*]

I recognized myself in that description: “worried and distracted by many things.”

But as I wrote to our congregation members last week, it is time for me to leave the kitchen, to sit at our Lord’s feet again, and listen. “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” The time for moving through the valley to the hills from whence cometh our help is now. Please join me.

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