

# DISTRACTED OR PRESENT?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 July, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Helen Boerma

Pentecost 6 C

Psalm 52; Luke 10: 38-42;

Contemporary Reading: *Martha's List* by Sara Maitland

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xC9he3L8qxM>

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So, it's a short Gospel reading, but our contemporary reading shows that one can fill in a lot of the spaces with imagination.

I started with looking at the Gospel reading for today - and I thought, well, I know this story too well - and maybe many of us do.

When I saw that it was the Gospel reading for today, I showed it to a friend to see what she thought.

My friend said, "*It's hard to interpret the bible. Mary seems to get away with blue murder, and be praised.*"

I had to agree.

The funny thing is, that when I was young, I didn't think much about Martha. I had no desire to get bogged down in practical tasks, say in the kitchen. Just not interested. I'd rather go Mary's way any day! Get involved in the stimulating conversation and learning that was going on in the lounge room. "*Don't be a Martha*", the saying goes. So effectively, I silenced Martha.

But now I am getting older, I see it differently. I find myself identifying with Martha, how certain tasks seem to fall to her, and how unfair that seems. She gets a raw deal!

When Martha protests, she seems to focus her resentment on her sister, Mary. She doesn't even ask, *What about Lazarus?* But I hadn't thought about Lazarus in that way. But, perhaps he wasn't well or wasn't able. But, there is certainly no mention of anyone else offering to help her at all!

Of course, like many, I presumed the story to be about the choices that women must make, or the tension which women embody, balancing domestic tasks, on the one hand, with the tasks of listening to, and getting involved with bigger, more interesting things.

So, is this a story about Women?

This story can be regarded as having important things to say about the place of women. Some who study these texts claim that Luke is enhancing the role of women; others assert that he is restricting women's roles.

I see Jesus, and Luke who was assembling the stories about him, as being people of their time, with no way of imagining life as we know it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In their world, a woman was dependent on a man, be it her father or her husband, all the days of her life. To be unmarried or a widow, would place a woman in a precarious position. Even today, the same could be said of women in many societies in the world, including some groups in Australia.

Luke depicts instances of Jesus connecting with women, in a way that challenged their subordinate status. Writers such as Paul make statements, in their letters, about relationships between women and men in the congregations, but these statements need to be read in light of Jesus' own teachings.

We also need to understand how the early Christian movement was conducting itself under some pressure, trying to avoid making unnecessary waves, to reassure the Roman world that the Christian movement presented no threat to Roman values.

So, in our Gospel reading, Martha and Mary are depicted in the setting of their home. Mary chooses to leave the domestic responsibilities, to listen and learn. The expression "*to sit at Jesus' feet*" meant that she took the stance of a disciple.

I wonder if, actually, Mary's stance as a listener is like this (gesture - hands under chin looking up submissively) as we often see it in art, at Jesus' feet literally?

Or more like this (gesture - hand pointing) involving questioning and challenging.

Her choice to be there may have been a bit unconventional, although there is evidence that some rabbis at the time did encourage the education of daughters, even in the Torah.

Jesus' defence of Mary's choice could be a liberating message for a woman in a community where her role did not include receiving an education. We are not told whether then Mary is charged with responsibility to pass on or to apply what she learns.

And, I am still wondering, what about the job of hospitality? Does Mary's liberation depend on her leaving this work to Martha? Is Martha's work devalued?

All this leads me to my next question: how do we read such text, which is around 2000 years old, with fresh eyes, to see if it has wisdom for us today?

We can look at this story in isolation, or we could look at it in the context of the whole of Luke's Gospel, in particular what comes directly before this story and what comes directly afterwards.

In the general lead up to the story, Jesus is travelling around with his disciples, including some women. Disciples had been sent off in pairs and people such as Mary and Martha were essential to this mission, for example, by way of hospitality. And those sent out were instructed to receive whatever was provided with acceptance.

Possibly also, from their home as a hub in Bethany, the two sisters may have contributed to the movement locally in an ongoing way, including when Jesus was not there.

The story that immediately precedes the story of Mary and Martha is the parable of the man who fell among thieves (commonly known as the parable of the Good Samaritan.) This story arose when a lawyer asks Jesus about what one must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answers in terms of the two Great Commandments, being to love God and to love one's neighbour.

The lawyer continued to press Jesus by seeking a boundary definition, "*Who is my neighbour?*" Jesus then told the story about how, faced with a man lying injured by the road, various people of religious learning, people who we would have expected to do the right thing, failed to respond. However, a person from an enemy or outsider group was the one to act with compassion.

The story illustrates how it is doing something which counts!

Then, we're on to Mary and Martha. At first, this story paired with the Good Samaritan seems like a contradiction. The Good Samaritan story stresses the importance of action. With Mary and Martha, is it inaction which is praised?

So, what was the author's intention?

A closer look reveals that Martha has, in fact, just enacted exactly what Jesus was talking about in the Good Samaritan story. When she encounters Jesus travelling along the road, she welcomes and assists him. She demonstrates love of neighbour. But there is a problem!

It seems that in Jesus' time, as in our own, it was possible to get caught up in busy-ness at the expense of focus.

We have substantial things to do, simply in living. Supporting ourselves and perhaps a family too, working to pay the bills, finding and maintaining a home, doing work that is important, say with the church, or for a cause, in improving the lives of others in some way, responding to those around us such as for care or companionship.

It's true that being productive often means being busy. But it's only true up to a point. Busy-ness is not always effective. As we all know from experience, staying busy can have damaging effects on our well-being: more stress, exhaustion and an inability to focus on the present.

Martha's experience seems to highlight this. Her predicament is one that is common to hosts. Perhaps she has anxieties that many of us experience when guests are coming.

- She might worry about the presentation of her home.
- Is it tidy?
- Is it clean enough?
- If not, will I be judged?
- Will the meal be ready in time?
- How do I juggle that while I serve drinks?
- I hope the food turns out okay.
- Will my guests be impressed with the meal?
- How will I measure up?

Martha is in danger of getting so bogged down in the details of hospitality that she misses the point of the whole exercise, which is to enjoy the company of her guests.

One can become so overwhelmed with tasks that you reach a tipping point - a point where everything falls apart, because you can no longer withstand the weight of your commitments.

Once you've reached that point, it becomes fairly obvious that you're over-committed.

Martha seems to be overburdened, and she loses it. She appeals to her distinguished guest, "*Do you not care?*" And she demands that he tell her sister to help her.

Perhaps, though, Jesus is trying to help Martha to recognise the signs of being "too busy" before she reaches that tipping point.

He doesn't give her the response she expected. That's not unusual, is it! He says with sympathy, Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things.

Martha may have been surprised by Jesus' use of the word distracted. Excuse me! You're saying I'm distracted! Wasn't it Mary who was distracted from helping me with the practical tasks?

Jesus also described her as anxious, troubled, or according to one translation, "*putting herself in an uproar*".

However, it seems that Jesus wants to help Martha see: "*Few things are really necessary, or even one.*" In other words, try to make some decisions about what is most important, and what is less necessary. This involves slowing down, taking time to feel, to process, to focus on what is the important or the necessary thing that is there in front of us.

Understood in isolation, this story might seem to be about women and women's work. However, in other stories, Luke depicts Jesus as admonishing one host or another, including male disciples. So we could reasonably move away from focus on gender. Instead this story can be seen as expressing concern for ways of being a host, or actually ways of being a disciple, or a human being, male or female.

It is a story for any of us, when we struggle to be present to what is the important thing.

For example, the story could express concern for the parent who, watching his child play soccer, is so keen to tell her what she should be doing out on the field, that he misses the one important thing: His child wants his affirmation that she is actually having a go.

We human beings are challenged; it is so easy to miss the important thing.

Perhaps our story presents one brief instance of disagreement between Martha and Mary, in an otherwise healthy relationship.

Perhaps, Mary's experience of listening to Jesus inspires her to meaningful action.

Perhaps Martha responds to Jesus' guidance to reconnect with what had inspired her in the first place.

In other parts of the Bible, the two sisters appear unified, just as the two aspects of life, action and reflection, or love of neighbour and love of God, are reconciled.

Martha and Mary can be seen to personify two aspects in the life of one person, in tension sometimes, but at best, integrated.

In the parable of the man left injured by robbers, the Samaritan man may have had commitments, but he interrupts his journey to tend to the injuries of the man injured by the road. His "*one needful thing*" was to aid a fellow human being in distress.

Martha is also prompted to interrupt the tasks associated with hospitality, to attend to her "*one needful thing*", which is to be with Jesus.

It is also worth noting that:

1. The Good Samaritan parable concludes, "*Go and do likewise*". And
2. the story which immediately follows Mary and Martha opens with a disciple asking, "*Lord teach us how to pray*".

Understood together, the two stories (the Good Samaritan paired up with Martha and Mary) illustrate that: love of God means nothing without care for neighbour; and care for neighbour requires care for ourselves by listening to God.

In answer to the lawyer who has questioned Jesus, the love of God and for our fellow human beings are one and the same.

Action and reflection are inseparable, integrated into what has come to be called the "Greatest Commandment". In fact, Martha and Mary need each other.

In our world Martha and Mary continue to express themselves.

Brene Brown, for example, is a social researcher who speaks about the power of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. While many of us are afraid of vulnerability, busy-ness seems to provide a numbing effect, or a distraction, much like alcohol or other drugs.

It's almost as if, if we stay busy enough, the truth of our lives won't catch up with us.

Then, all of a sudden, circumstances can change, and we have some free time. Surprisingly, this isn't always comfortable for us.

I want to share some examples of some of the things that people become aware of, once they're in this space.

- A fear of being ordinary, unworthy or unlovable, unless I am overachieving.
- Thoughts about our parents or other precious people who are getting older and we don't get to see them or talk with them very often. Perhaps we pull away because we are terrified of losing them.
- A marriage that is lacking nourishment.
- Or children who are growing up fast and we have missed some of their important moments, or missed opportunities to connect with them.
- Many people live with feelings of loss and grief, or trauma.
- Feeling unsettled when one has time to wonder about life, and about one's purpose.

- Feeling a lack of confidence to sustain real relationships with people who know and love us. It's easy to get distracted from this when we spend time on-line communicating with people who seem to care about what we have to say there.
- Feeling restless or lonely unless I am busy doing things to help others.

We struggle to be present to these feelings. Distractions can be needed at times. But if we can allow ourselves, these feelings can lead us into connection.

I think we have all experienced moments that touch the kind of life and the kind of connection that Jesus talks about when he says, "*I have come that you may have life and to have it to the full.*"

Those kinds of moments are compelling, wonderful. Moments like this awaken us. We relish that life. We want more.

Tasting life in that way, we know that we don't want to be distracted from it. I don't want to miss my life!

So, what's the answer?

I believe that this story teaches us that being busy with a purpose is good. Jesus values Martha's good actions which contribute to the work of God in the world.

There is no suggestion that Mary is choosing to be in a state of perpetual listening and learning, that she isn't doing anything.

But, for Martha, just in this moment, with Jesus as her guest, and bearing in mind that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and will not be with them forever, is encouraging Martha to pause for something that will nourish her.

But still, for goodness sake, can someone please give Martha a hand?

Some of us are in circumstances with very limited control over their choices.

I am thinking, for example, of people in poverty whose labour is exploited.

Or people with limited support from others, caring for people who depend on them.

Perhaps Martha had some choice, in that moment, to rethink her priorities. For example, to simplify the meal, or to eat later. Sometimes, however, those of us with more choice can do what we can to give another person a needed break.

We all need to balance action with quiet times, identified as prayer.

So, what nourishes you?

Many people, myself included to some extent, can be alienated by the words "prayer" or "God", with all their meanings and all their limitations. However, I believe that there are millions of ways in which we might love God, or we might pray, and most of these things might never be named as prayer.

Here are a few examples:

- We might get outside, fill our lungs with fresh air and feel good to be alive.
- We enjoy loving physical contact.
- We relish human gifts we have and live life with gratitude.
- We connect with the arts, such as music.
- We enjoy and care for the creation
- We honour cultural heritage, our shared history, our sense of place in this country
- We appreciate details of life we mostly take for granted.

What we are doing in such examples are things that bring us a sense of okay-ness or harmony, by which we understand ourselves to be worthy and sacred, connected to one another, as fellow human beings, by a love greater than ourselves. However we name our experiences, we know that we do need to allow time for them.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote a book called *Gift from the Sea* in the early 1950s, and I think she put it well when she said:

*"This is what one thirsts for, I realize, after the smallness of the day, of work, of details, even of communication, one thirsts for the magnitude and universality of a night full of stars, pouring into one like a fresh tide."*