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THE SPIRITUAL HABIT OF CENTERING Michael B. Beough
Luke 10:38-42 October 19, 2008
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This story of Mary and Martha borders on being a classic story of family relationships. It is so true to life. It is life. And yet in this story we get a reminder of something we should never forget, not if we want our days to be something more than a whirr of mindless activities and lost opportunities.

This story concerns two sisters and what happens when they invite Jesus to visit in their home. Martha, who owns the home, immediately gets busy trying to be the perfect hostess. She is following the social rules of the day. In fact, she is exhibiting one of our church's Core Values, hospitality. She starts preparing a meal for Jesus. Can't you just hear her in the kitchen? Pots rattling. The chop, chop, chop of a knife on a cutting board. The screen door slamming as wood is brought in for the stove. Dishes being set on the table. God bless the Martha's of the world!

Mary does something different. In fact, she ignores the social codes of her day. She sits at the feet of Jesus where only men would normally be allowed. She listens to what Jesus is saying as if she has the right to be a disciple. This is the same Mary who later on anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume while her sister Martha again is, you guessed it, in the kitchen cooking. (See John 12:1-3.) Seems to be a pattern here.

This is the scene when suddenly Martha bursts into the room with smoke pouring out of her ears. A thunderstorm in her eyes. A rolling pin in one hand and a meat cleaver in the other. Jesus is thinking, 'this could be bad'. And let me tell you, it is bad, really bad, but not for Mary. Bad for Jesus. What happens next is every pastor's nightmare. In family systems theory, it is called triangulation. That's when someone tries to use you to get at someone else. Or when someone creates a triangle to get at you. Such as, "Pastor, I think you should tell Sister Suzie that we don't like the way she sings that high G." Man, for the pastor that's a no-win situation.

So here is Jesus getting triangulated by Martha. "Lord, don't you care that my worthless sister has left me to do all the work? Tell her to get in the kitchen, right now!"

Family Systems Theory says the pastor or anyone being triangulated should politely but firmly decline the invitation to get drawn in. I have learned the hard way how deadly the middle position can be. Now apparently Jesus has not heard of Family Systems Theory. His proper response should have been, "You tell Mary yourself. Deal with it." Instead, Jesus seizes the moment to teach us a lesson for the ages. It almost sounds cruel to the Martha's of the world. But sometimes, triangulation or no triangulation, you

just have to tell the truth. The worst thing you can do is to try to make everyone happy. The truth is best.

In this scene, Jesus tells the truth. He refuses to tell Mary to get in the kitchen. In fact, he commends Mary, but his main desire is to help Martha see that for this moment in time she (Martha) needs to adjust her priorities. Jesus really comes across as quite unflattering. He tells Martha that she is "worried and distracted by many things," and that is not a good thing to be. He goes on to say Mary has chosen the better part.

With stories like this, I always wonder what happened next. How did Martha react? Did she sit down with Mary and listen to Jesus? Or did she go back to her worries and distractions? Did Jesus and Mary later join Martha in the kitchen to get the dinner ready?

Now I don't think Jesus was being critical of Martha's hospitality. Nor do I think he was condoning Mary's neglect of work that needs to get done. **But I do believe Jesus wanted to help Martha get some balance in her life.**

You remember what it says in the Book of Ecclesiastes? (3:1-8) "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die," and so on. I believe Jesus is telling Martha that there is a time to work, and there is a time to sit at the feet of Jesus and just listen.

Oh, I believe it is okay to ask Jesus questions and dialogue with him, but you know what I mean. For those of us who believe Jesus is special, it doesn't make sense to make ourselves so busy that we don't have time to sit at his feet.

Of course, I am preaching to the choir because you are here this morning. You are doing what Jesus recommends to Martha. And many of you are part of a Growth Group or a Bible study class or a mission group. And I suspect many of you, maybe all of you, take time each day to pray and read Scripture and listen for God's word to you. I just bet that each of you live such a balanced life that you never feel worried or distracted, right? You never get the feeling that your life is spinning out of control. Deadlines, shmeadlines, what, me worry? Every day you put in at least 8 hours of work, spend lots of quality time with your children as you drive them all over the country taking them to their sports events and then helping them with their homework, and all with a smile. You still have time to watch your favorite programs on television, do all that dirty laundry, prepare meals and clean up, go to the grocery store for that one thing you forgot the last time you were there, read the mail, read the newspaper, read your favorite book, and ... and ... you still have time to spend a wonderful relaxed hour reading the Bible and praying and just listening to Jesus. Right? Does that sound like your life?

Don't you feel sorry for all the Marthas who don't live such balanced lives?

I am just toying with you, of course, and that would be cruel if there is no alternative to the whirlwind lives we live. There is no question that most of us need to give up some things in order to balance our lives. But there is another way that we call "centering". **I believe that before we can balance our lives, we have to get centered.** That is a physical law. Think of a see-saw. We need a center point and once we know what that is, we will start to see the whirlwind slow down. We will see the whirlwind from a different perspective.

We are talking about habits of the heart that God wants to form in us through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit living in us. Today and this week in our Growth Groups, we are talking about identifying our center and moving toward the center to give balance to our lives.

This past summer, several of our young people heard about laminin at the Synod Youth Conference. It seems that laminin is a cross-shaped molecular structure that literally holds our cells together. Here is a molecular picture of it. The guy with the guitar is Christian songwriter Chris Tomlin. At this concert, a dynamic speaker named Louie Giglio makes a big deal out of this fact and encourages young people to see that the cross of Jesus is what literally holds their lives together. How great is God to put the cross at the center of our being?

As I thought about centering as a habit of the heart, it occurred to me that the Holy Spirit living in us keeps wanting to turn us to the empowering center that Jesus provides for our lives.

The spiritual life is not about dividing our lives up into time slots where we give so much time to prayer, and so much time to church, and so much time to our jobs, and so much time to our children, and so forth. It is about being centered on Jesus in the midst of the whirlwind of our days. It is about listening to him when deadlines loom. It is about listening to him when scurrying across town to get children to their next activity. It is about listening to him when we watch our portfolios shrink. It is about listening to him when we are slinging the food on the table. It is about listening to him when the doctor says our blood pressure is too high. It is about listening to him, sitting at his feet, at the still center of the universe where he says to us, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need at this moment of only one thing."

Move to the center.

You could even make it a great game for yourself. We live our lives under such great pressure. Maybe a big business deal, a board meeting, a tight schedule, ten things to do before you go to sleep, finding a new job –

you are in the middle of it and your blood pressure starts going up and you can't escape the ticking of the clock because there never seems to be enough time – and you are not sure how any of it connects with the dots of your life, at least not the life you hoped for and always wanted. And you know that tomorrow you won't remember a lot of what you did today. Time will simply disappear, parts of your life lost forever.

Here's the game. As you are zipping along and time is eating your lunch, just stop for a moment to ask where Jesus is in all of this.

Some years back I started doing this in the car. This is kind of a silly example, but I think it applies.

There have been times when I have taken on too many things. For me, it has usually been too many church related things that put the pressure on me. In a pressured world, with so much to get done, every minute becomes a critical moment. Ever noticed that? Ever yelled at your computer because it was taking so long? Sixty seconds seems a lot longer than it used to. Man, I am hard to live with when I feel that I am under a time crunch, when each minute seems like it could be the end of the world as I know it. I was especially bad in the car, trying to get to meetings I didn't want to be at in the first place. It was those stop lights, and those detours, and those slow drivers. Every minute lost seemed to be the most critical moment in my life, and I found myself yelling at stop lights, and cursing my bad luck, and zooming around the slow pokes (I still do that, sometimes.). And I could feel my pulse racing and I'm sure my blood pressure rising, and I would literally calculate the minutes I was behind schedule. Can anyone relate to this?

But I don't do that anymore. I started playing this game. It is kind of fun. If I am on the way to a meeting, and it seems like the whole world is out to make me late, I just smile and if no one is in the car with me, I say out loud, "Okay, Lord what are you trying to tell me?" "You're telling me to slow down, aren't you?" "You want me to notice something, don't you?" I have discovered it is a great way to get out of the whirlwind for a moment, to get off the merry-go-round by moving toward the center. To let God have my time. To sit at the feet of Jesus. To go to the center of my being and find there the cross and know that this amazing God has imprinted me with his love and has a life for me to live that not even a whirlwind can destroy or take from me.

That truly is the one thing needed. And I pray for all of us that we might discover Jesus at the center of our being and make him the center of all we do and all we are becoming. If you don't know him today as your constant companion, Savior, and friend, then I encourage you to invite him into your heart. Let him have his rightful place, and you will have eternal life.