

**The Balanced Life-Martha and Mary
Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-3, 25-44
and John 12:1-8
July 7, 2024
Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church
Grand Rapids MI**

I love long holiday weekends like this Fourth of July. I grew up in a family of five siblings and nine cousins who lived just three short miles away. We grew up like a one large family of fourteen kids. Most of us spend every fourth of July together at my cousin Kathy's cabin in Northern Minnesota. A place with many family memories. I love those times, because it seems like time slows down. You sit out on the deck and catch up with people, or you go to the beach and build sandcastles with the little kids. Maybe you go on a lazy pontoon ride or stand on the dock and watch the younger kids get flung around on the inner tube. After so many years we finally have the food figured out. You are on your own for breakfast and everyone contributes to the snacks and beverages. Each family unit prepares one of the lunches or dinners and Sunday is leftovers.

Each night ends with many of us sitting around the campfire telling family stories with long pauses of silent bliss watching the flicker of flames as the stars come out. Time seems to stand still, and you relax and take in the love.

Whether or not you have a lakeside spot, I am sure you can remember a place and a time where time stands still as you enjoyed the presence of a loved ones. In our busy lives we need those times when time takes on a different dimension, where that sense of obligation and task take a back seat to just being.

Our world so often is measured and judged by how productive you are. How many widgets you made, how many sales or clients you met or how many hours you clocked. Where your "to do" list grows with each passing day. It is always accelerating and demanding more than we have to give.

Yet we know life is more than staying busy or being productive. In the end what will matter most is if we have loved deeply and touched others. Many of us feel like we live to work when we would rather work to live.

In the last of our series on women of the Bible, we are looking at two sisters, Martha and Mary who are very close to Jesus. Luke and John both have stories of these women, but John adds the brother Lazarus to the story so scholars are not sure if this is the same family, but for today we will treat them as if they are for this reflection.

If you have been in the church for a while, you have probably heard a sermon about the story of Martha working too hard and complaining to Jesus. Mary on the other hand seems like a favorite baby sister type who can do no wrong. All while Lazarus is the silent one. In all three stories, Lazarus says nothing. All we know about this family is that Jesus loved them deeply and stays with them when he comes to town.

I am sure we all know people in our lives that are like Martha or Mary. Maybe you have even been compared to one in the past. One is the overactive, productive type, very task oriented. While the other one is much more relational, empathetic, maybe even emotional. If you have ever been part of a family, you also know that sibling squabbles about who is getting more work done and who is goofing off. So yes, this is a very relatable story. But do we really need to feel like one is better or worse?

Jesus may appear to be taking sides with Mary, Jesus acknowledges Martha's role and only says that she is worried and is distracted by things. We often do that. We worry about how others perceive us or whether we are doing enough as if it is all on us. But Jesus here says "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." I think Jesus is gently trying to remind Martha to not worry or be distracted by tasks over people. Relationships are what's important.

For me, I see the church represented in these two people. The church needs to be both Martha and Mary in this world. We all want to make a difference in the world. We

want to help others be better people, we want to improve people's lives, we want to care for the things God has entrusted to us. But we also need to care for the people as people. We need to be focused on being more than doing.

From the beginning God places an emphasis on rest and relationships over tasks and work. Even God rested. We have the commandments that almost exclusively focus on healthy relationships rather than a bunch of prohibitions from certain tasks. These commands are focused on creating healthy relationships. These stories of Martha and Mary emphasize the relationships far above the hospitality and work that Martha worried about. We need this balance in our lives and in the life of the church.

Society equates bigger with better yet we know that different size churches have a different way of creating those relational connections. It takes different models to be effective. East Church once was a program or maybe even a corporate size church. We supported relationships through ministry events, small groups and guilds. Today we would be considered a family size church and yet many of us still want to feel like a program church. We want the paid staff. We want the full slate of programs, but we don't have the capacity. This creates tension and creates burnout. One thing I have noticed here at East Church is that many members of the church grew up in a time when programs were center of church life. We had lots of people to offer lots of activities and ways of attracting potential members.

With Family size congregations, relational ministry becomes more of the focus. You must switch your focus more toward offering fewer, but deeper, more relational connection points. You function more like a family. Making that change is difficult, because we tend to see church as task oriented or event oriented. To stop working and be present can be hard for some.

I am reading a book by Dr. Andy Root, a professor at Luther Seminary called "When the Church stops Working." It is a synopsis of a longer six book series on being the church in the secular age of the 21st century. Dr. Root points out how the church is

declining and needs to adjust to a new way of being in the world. The church has been caught up in the capitalist mentality of continuous productivity way of life. It is an old model that is killing us today. We need to shift more to a relational model where we invest our time more into each other rather than into tasks. We need to resist the capitalist trap to think that we need to do more, better, faster. When we really need to slow down and seek the transcendent experience of God in our midst.

There is value in waiting, in resting, in prioritizing people over things comes through in our last story where Mary uses the jar of nard to anoint Jesus. Jesus says to Judas, “you will always have the poor, but you won’t always have me.” Meaning, you will always have more things to do, but I am here now.

In the end, the final story, we still see Martha at work. We find Lazarus alive and seated at Jesus feet and we find Mary caring for Jesus by anointing his feet. She is tuned into what is coming soon. The stench of death that was feared has been replaced with the smell of perfume and expressions of love.

We fear the death of the church and we are busy trying to do everything we can think of try to save it. But we forget the truth that Jesus is here with us, in each other. Let us sit down, wait and listen for Jesus.

Let us stop trying to “do church” and start to “BE THE CHURCH” for we are the People of God!