

Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

³⁸Now 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."

John 6:35-40 (NRSV)

³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

What or who really lies at the center of our lives? We might say that it is God, but what would someone conclude just from watching us? Might they not tell us that we must worship the sheer joy and fulfillment that busyness must bring us?

Why else would we do it all.

The story of Mary and Martha at home with Jesus is one of those stories that feed my imagination. I can picture them in their home, Martha busy in the. . . *one minute, I'll be right back . . . sorry, about that, but I really had to get that call . . . now, where was I . . .* I can picture them in their home, Martha busy in the kitchen, Mary sitting at Jesus' feet while Martha starts to . . . *oops, I better get that too, someone is texting me and they surely need me right now, besides, I can text while I write this study . . . what? Why don't I just turn off the darn phone? Are you kidding, I'm way too needed to be out of touch. What would they do if they can't reach me? Get real . . .*

What have we done to ourselves? We seem to be busying ourselves to death. We over-schedule, over-commit, and over-available ourselves. I really doubt that there are many of us who escape this, who really do turn-off and tune-out.

But this series isn't really about simplifying or reprioritizing our lives. It is about idols – reducing God to a concept or an idea; moving someone or something into the place that is actually God's place in our lives and in our world. Could busyness really be an idol? Let's begin by taking a closer look at Mary and Martha.

Stephanie Frey tells the story of a woman in her church who never likes hearing this story preached because it makes her feel like she can't ever hope to get it right. If, like Martha, she works hard to make sure everyone gets fed, she'll get labeled as "over-functioning." If, like Mary, she sits and listens too long, nothing gets done!¹

¹Stephanie Frey is pastor of a Lutheran church in Minnesota. This is from her reflections on Luke 10:38-42, "Living with Martha," in the July 13, 2004, issue of *Christian Century*.

The story of these two sisters is from a lengthy portion of Luke that is sometimes called the “travel narrative” (Luke 9:51-19:44). Jesus has left Galilee (the region several days’ walk north of Jerusalem) to begin the long walk toward his death. During this entire journey, Jesus is teaching his disciples, challenging the growing crowds, inviting all to

Horizontal and Vertical

Luke, like all the gospel writers, uses literary and rhetorical techniques to create a compelling proclamation of the Good News. Juxtaposing contrasting stories is one such technique.

For example, Matthew skillfully places the story of Jesus feeding the multitude immediately after the story of Herod’s banquet and the execution of John the Baptist. By putting these stories side-by-side, Matthew draws a stark contrast between the rotten empire of Caesar and the life-giving empire of Christ; between Herod’s banquet of death and Jesus’ banquet of life.

Luke uses the same technique in today’s passage. The story of Martha and Mary is immediately preceded by the parable of the Good Samaritan, one of the best-known of all Jesus’ parables. It is a parable about our neighbors, about our relationships with others. In contrast, the story of Martha and Mary is focused on our relationship with the Word, with Christ. The parable of the Good Samaritan casts our gaze outward, horizontally. The story of Martha and Mary casts our gaze upward, vertically.

It would be a mistake to see a choice in this. Jesus isn’t asking us to choose whether to love God or neighbor; we are to love God *and* neighbor. Consider the cross suspended over our altar; it expresses *both* the horizontal *and* the vertical dimensions of our faith. If we were to ask Jesus whether we should focus our energies on devotion to God or on service to others, his answer would probably be a simple “Yes.”

follow him, and confronting the Jewish leadership.

After Jesus responds to a lawyer’s testing with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus arrives at a home in Bethany, a small town two miles east of Jerusalem. It is the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus. We learn much more about Jesus’ relationship with this family in John’s Gospel. When Lazarus dies of an illness, Jesus comes to Bethany where he resuscitates Lazarus, bringing him back to life (John 11:1-44). On the eve of Palm Sunday, Mary anoints Jesus with perfume and wipes his feet with her hair (John 12:1-8).² This is a family that is deeply involved in and committed to Jesus and his ministry. We need to keep this in mind when we come to Luke’s story. This domestic confrontation happens in the context of an established friendship. So, knowing Martha and Mary, Jesus is probably not surprised at what happens.

The confrontation

Martha has welcomed Jesus into their home. Yet despite there being work to do and a meal to prepare, Mary plops herself down at Jesus’ feet.³ This is pretty much how things are with Martha and Mary. On another occasion, when Jesus comes to Bethany after Lazarus’ death, Martha would go out to greet him, while Mary stays in the house. Martha would prepare a meal, while Mary wipes Jesus feet with her hair.

Can’t you picture Martha. For awhile she is probably ok with Mary sitting with Jesus rather than helping. But as time passes and Martha is left with everything, she begins to stew. She bangs the pots a little louder. Cabinets are closed with enthusiasm. Finally,

²A common misconception is that the Mary who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume is Mary Magdalene; but it is not, it is the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

³This is a shocking image. In the Jewish world, women did not sit at the feet of rabbis (teachers) as disciples (learners), yet Jesus’ teaching here is focused exclusively on women. Jesus doesn’t just teach that all persons are welcome at God’s table, he enacts it.

she has had it and marches out to the living room – where she *tells* Jesus what he *must* do! Whew.

With great gentleness, Jesus criticizes Martha. He doesn't rebuke her for the work she is doing, but for her attitude toward Mary. Martha has forgotten that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deut 8:3; Luke 4:4). Mary has chosen to focus all her attentions on, as Peterson renders it in *The Message*, the "main course" – and Martha ought not criticize her for it. Still, it would be a mistake to be too hard on Martha or to elevate Mary. This is why we need to read this story alongside the story of the Samaritan (see the pg. 2 text box). There is a time to go and do (as Jesus tells the lawyer) and a time to listen and learn.

Who has time for the main course!

I suspect that most of us have little trouble identifying with Martha. There is so much to do. We are often overwhelmed by the frantic pace of our lives and the seemingly endless demands on our waking hours. Who has time to pray? Who has time to read the Bible? For many of us, it is probably easier to wade into our hectic schedules rather than adjust priorities or reconsider our choices.

Pastor Frey writes, "It is easier, for example, to make a casserole for a grieving family than it is to offer a word of hope in Christ, easier to welcome a new neighbor with a fresh loaf of bread than to invite her to worship. . . . Worship becomes a 'scheduling problem,' one that interferes with the 'one day we can sleep in.'" That stings but how many of us haven't said to ourselves at one time or another, "I just need to take this Sunday off." Most of us probably run a much greater risk of having a Martha-problem (too much doing) than a Mary-problem (too much listening).

But as Frey goes on to say, "The good news is that Jesus the host has granted permission for all distracted, frantic people to sit down and eat their fill of word and promise. When we join them and nourish ourselves at the table, we'll be ready to put hands and feet, hearts and minds to work."

I think that given the choice between Martha (the doer) and Mary (the listener), most of us would identify with Martha. We are busy people, prone to being over-busy, and perhaps even taking pride in it. We are people who know how to get things done. If no one else will do it, we will.

In and of itself, this is not a bad thing. There is much to be done. In the Bible, love is an action verb; love is more about doing than feeling. The Good Samaritan is "good" because he *does* something. Martha's mistake was not in making dinner, it was in losing sight of the vertical; she lost the balance in her life and got angry with her sister for spending time with Jesus!

How do we find this balance? How do we build a life and a faith that holds together our head, our heart, and our hands – the vertical and horizontal? It is tempting here to plunge into a list of tips, tricks, and techniques for trying to achieve this balance, but I wonder if Jesus is urging us toward something a little more radical.

And so we come to the idol of busyness.

Busy, yes . . . but an idol?

Busyness, a whirlwind of activities, an endless series of crises needing our immediate attention. All of these can sometimes satisfy our need to be wanted, to be needed, to be important, to matter. They can actually seem to help us cope with emptiness even as they wear us down. They end up at the very center of our lives, consuming our days, gobbling up our attention and energies. They end up being idols, false gods, who can't provide us with what we need or even seek. Is a good mother defined by how many

lessons and activities she ferries her kids too? Is a great father really defined by how much he makes? I don't know who you'd answer these sorts of questions, though I could guess. But what would someone conclude from observing how we live, the choices we make, the frenetic pace we keep?

Rather than trying to figure out how to make more time for prayer or worship or Bible study, what if we started from scratch. What if we began with God and then figured out how to make time for everything else. Rather than trying to make room for worship and Sunday School on the weekends, what if we took all that as a given and then figured out how we might best spend the rest of the weekend. Do you think this as radical as I think it is? What if we returned God to the center and let else flow from there.

Mary is busy in the kitchen making bread for hungry people, forgetting that the "bread of life" sits in her living room. No amount of busyness, no parade of crises, no carnival of activities, can or should replace Jesus as the center of who we are. Whoever comes to him will never be hungry, and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty (John 6:35).

Whatever or whoever we place at the center of our lives is our idol, whether that is work or success or family or even busyness. Who or what is at the center of your life?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley is leading nearly two dozen St. Andrew Fellowship Groups through this series on *American Idols*. Edlen has written some discussion questions for the groups. They will be very helpful as well to those who are studying this series individually.

1. Do you sometimes get so busy that you lose focus on what needs to get done, and find your schedule setting rather than you setting your schedule?
2. What times of year, what holidays, what seasons, or what times at work demand enormous amounts of your time, your energy, and your effort?
3. Answer the following questions:
 - a) Do you identify with Mary or Martha?
 - b) Why do you think Jesus said Mary has chosen the better part?
 - c) Do you sometimes wish you could just go and hide?
 - d) Are you driven by your life's purpose or are you driven by your pressing issues?
 - e) What is your main thing?
 - f) How does your busyness affect your family?
4. Do you think you could lead your family in taking a media fast? (Pick a night where you turn off the cell phone, the computer, the TV, and landline ringer and just spend time together talking or playing games? If you're single, having over a group of friends and doing the same thing?)
5. What are the most effective ways that you regain focus when you lose it?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Luke 4:1-4 Neither Jesus nor we live by bread alone.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 11:1-16 The death of Lazarus (Martha and Mary's brother)</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 12:1-8 Mary anoints Jesus on the evening before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Thursday, John 4:7-15 Jesus is not only the bread of life, he is the living water.</p>
<p>Friday, Psalm 63 It is God for whom our soul thirsts – nothing and no one else.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer List</p>

