

“Good News for the Hurried”

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Luke 10:38–42

We live in busy times. We live in hurried times. Am I right? I see it in the faces of so many in this church, and on my neighbors faces, too: the fatigue that comes from being made to satisfy expanding responsibilities in time that remains frustratingly finite. Even if you are retired, certainly you know this, too, perhaps more so. (A man I know who had recently become retired once said to me, “I don’t know how I got anything done before, I’m so busy!”) But even if you aren’t familiar with this directly then you know it from the rushed existence your children and grandchildren endure — you see it, and you wonder how anyone can call this “progress.”

For we stuff our limited hours with more and more:

work, chores, the care and feeding of hobbies, the pursuit of ever more elaborate forms of entertainment.

Sure, some of this is fun, some of it is necessary, a bit of it maybe helps the economy. But the rush at times gets a little too much. Sometimes, we just want to ease off on the accelerator, or maybe even slam on the brake.

But there is work to be done. And some don’t have jobs. Those of us who do should be grateful — right? — and hunker down to do the work . . . even if it is the work of three people. It’s the responsible thing to do.

Responsibility is important. We know that much in life will not work without responsibility. Life is less than it can be, less than it should be, without responsibility. It’s messier, more cluttered, chaotic, and louder. Without responsibility, without us being responsible and taking responsibility, with all the work that entails, life is surely, as Hobbes said, “mean, nasty, brutish, and short.”

And some people are truly responsible. They do their work, and that of others, too, if need be. They work during the day, then they spend their remaining waking moments doing housework, and then after too little sleep they get up early to continue the chores left over from the day before.

Most of you know that Tammi is from Holland, Michigan. And maybe you even know that each May they have something they call “Tulip Time.” It’s a very big deal, bringing in tourists from all over to see the tulips, parades, and Dutch dancers in their clogs.

What a shame: I always managed to miss it.

One tradition in Tulip Time is the street sweepers. Some enthusiastic young (and not so young) people dressed in traditional Dutch clothing will march down the main street of town with push brooms, sweeping the street.

No, I don’t get it, either.

But there’s something about this that seems so typically Dutch, even western Michigan Dutch. For they are a tidy, industrious people. It’s been said about this whole street-sweeping thing that only the Dutch could make a party out of cleaning.

The Bible passage I read is, I suspect, very familiar to most of us. We know this story of Mary and Martha, these sisters whose different ways of showing love for Jesus led to conflict.

We know Martha as the industrious one, the responsible one, the sister who cooked and cleaned and in many other ways as well tried to make things just right for Jesus' stay.

And we know Mary as the contemplative one, the listening one, the sister who sat at Jesus' feet to hear his teaching, to receive his blessing.

We are familiar with both of them, familiar with them in such a way that we quite likely even identify with them, or at least with one of them.

Actually, I suspect that most of us identify with Martha.

We appreciate her responsibility, for we are responsible people. We can relate to her industriousness, for we are hardworking folk ourselves. Martha is truly someone many of us understand. We see ourselves in her. So, as we read these verses, we sympathize with her frustration. Hey, we'd be frustrated, too if we were left doing all the work.

For Martha worked so hard. She was so busy with the many things that being a good hostess entails. She was rushing from one thing to the next: the roast, the dishes, the vacuuming, changing the sheets on the bed, putting clean towels in the bathroom. And *Mary* . . . well, Mary was just sitting around! That hardly seems fair.

Martha's frustration built and built until she had to say what was on her mind. And knowing that Jesus was all about justice, all about doing what was right, she sought to enlist him to her side: "Jesus, don't you care that Mary has left me to do all this work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me!"

Clearly, she expected Jesus to take her side. She knew he must care, really she did. Surely he did care! And since he cared, she knew he would *have* to take her side and tell Mary, "Hey, get a move on and help your sister." Martha clearly expected that Jesus' next words would be, "You're right, Martha. Okay, Mary, time for you to get back to work." And that would be it.

But it was not. Martha listens for those words in vain. Jesus does not take her side. Instead, he takes Mary's side.

"Martha, Martha," he replies. "You are worried by *many* things. *One* thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part."

Huh. I guess he didn't take her side. But I don't think this was a rejection of Martha, either, not really. The correction was slight, and it was full of love. For what Martha had chosen was not awful, or sinful. It's just that it wasn't the better choice, the ideal activity for that time, in that place.

She had thought that her own responsible work was the thing that ought to be done, that she had chosen the better part between the two sisters.

She had thought that her hurried activity was the right thing to do, and what her sister chose to do was greatly deficient in comparison.

She had thought that the priority ought to be put on the necessities of hosting Jesus, that this ought to come first, and once that was done, then there would be time for talking with the teacher.

But Jesus lets her know, lovingly, kindly, that she had it wrong. You see, her perspective on what was important needed correcting; her values needed reforming. Her frantic activity, full of hurry and worry, was not the way to honor him.

For she had thought that the difference between her and Mary, at that moment, was the contrast between responsibility and irresponsibility, between diligence and laziness. But the kind words of Jesus point her to a different contrast, the contrast

between hurry and attentiveness,
between worry and peace,
between a doing that cannot listen and a listening that does much.

You see, what Mary was showing was not irresponsibility, nor laziness, nor rudeness, nor a lack of love for her sister. No, she was showing that of all the important things there can be in the world, all the good and necessary and even urgent tasks that may be right in front of her (perhaps even screaming for her attention), not one of them can be counted as most important, none can count as being even *as* important as Jesus, who was before her right now, and nothing could be more important for her to do than to give her attention to him.

That's what Mary knew, if her actions be at all a window to her soul. And it's what *Martha* had to learn. For Martha valued activity, and rightly so; and she valued responsibility, and rightly so. But these had become far too demanding on poor Martha. They had caused her eyes and ears to be closed to the great opportunity right before her, the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from him, to be taught by the supreme Teacher, an opportunity that should not be considered as something that "can just wait."

Of course it could wait, I suppose. But so could the other things. Housework, or learning from Jesus; the tasks of the moment, or the things of the soul: which of these could wait? Which of these *should* wait? Which of these has the priority?

With Jesus in the room, is there really any question?

Jesus has been teaching Mary. But now he taught Martha, in those kind, loving words of correction. And what he was teaching Martha (and Mary) was that his presence made everything different. His being there, with them, in their home, in their lives, it upset the normal ordering of priorities. With him, things that were normally good and right, things that usually took precedence, these had to be understood differently, not as unimportant, but certainly no longer as *all*-important. With Jesus, their way of looking at things, their way of doing things, how they made choices, the things they valued, all these had to be understood anew.

It's like this: Jesus was with them, and that meant that things needed to be different.

Their old ways had to be transformed by Jesus' new way.

His peace demanded their submission. His teaching required their attention. His love would accept no distraction.

With him, there was no time for hurry, no room for worry. With him, the responsibilities of the day would have their place, their *proper* place, where there can be no tyranny of the immediate because even over that place Jesus is Lord.

That's what Jesus was teaching them. He was teaching them about life, sure, and about time, and about priorities, yes. But most importantly, he was teaching them about *himself*, and that *in him* they could have freedom and peace.

For Martha, yes, and for Mary, too, this was good news, good news for the hurried.

I believe it is for us, too.

For we can so relate to Martha. We are the busy, the hurried, the worried, the ones who take our responsibilities seriously. And so often those responsibilities become all consuming. Very often, they are just about the most important thing.

But they are not, as Martha and Mary show us, *really* the most important thing. What was true for Martha and Mary is also true for us: when Jesus is with you, nothing can be more important than to give your attention to him, that in Jesus hurry gives way to attentiveness, worry submits to peace, and a doing that cannot listen is overcome by a listening that in its letting go does much. For us, too, Jesus is good news for the hurried.

It's not that Jesus takes away our responsibilities. The fires will keep burning, the urgent will keep demanding.

But what Jesus taught Martha, he also teaches us: if we place him first, if we seek his instruction first, then the other things will have their proper space and time.

Many of us feel that we're too busy to pray at length, we have too little time to read the Bible, our lives are too hurried to allow us to meditate on the things of God and the mysteries of Christ.

Martha, I suspect, would tell us that our priorities are seriously messed up.

If you put time with Jesus first, then there will be time for your responsibilities, for those things that truly have some importance. And if you don't put time with Jesus first, then you have set yourself on a path in which responsibilities become dictators and which leads to hurry and worry and exhaustion.

So, let's heed the lesson Martha learned, and sit, with her and Mary, at the feet of Jesus, where we may be taught, where we may find peace, and comfort, and new life, and good news for us, who are hurried.