

“All things hold together”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Colossians 1:15-20 and Luke 10:38-42

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

A long time ago, two old friends met on a road in India. The one barely recognized the other, so much time had passed. He still wore the saffron robe of his youth. His friend, however, had long abandoned the robe, and now wore the humble clothes of a ferryman, who spent his days sitting by a river and ferrying people across its waves. The robed friend was a Buddhist monk, and had been so all his life. Every day, he lived a life of poverty, renouncing all personal possessions, devoting himself to meditation, fasting, and acts of compassion. All his life he had sought truth.

His friend, on the other hand, had thrown himself fully into the world, living for pleasure, before becoming a simple boatman on a river.

There, on that road, only one of these men’s faces shined with enlightenment. And it wasn’t the monk. It was the simple ferryman. He had discovered, almost by accident, what the other had spent his whole life seeking.

This is the story told in Herman Hesse’s novel *Siddhartha*.

It doesn’t seem fair. It’s not fair! The one worked his whole life for enlightenment, only for it to go to the guy who ran away and stinks of fish.

It doesn’t seem any fairer than this story of Jesus. Martha is doing everything she can to help Jesus. She is cooking and cleaning—all on her own—while Mary just sits there, listening to Jesus. And yet, when Martha begs Jesus to make Mary help her, Jesus criticizes Martha and says Mary’s got it right.

Well, Jesus, you can make your own dinner! Ungrateful jerk.

That’s what we think, right? Because a lot of us, we’re Martha. We work hard. We help others. We don’t like this story.

Except—when you look more closely at this passage—you realize that Jesus doesn’t criticize Martha for her hospitality or her hard work. He looks at this woman who has walked by his side as a disciple all these years, this woman who is running herself ragged trying to do everything right, and he loves her. He loves her, and out of concern, he says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” The first of the three Greek words used for worry and distraction implies “being pulled or dragged in different directions,”¹ its Greek stem, *σπάω* (“spao”), meaning “to break,” the root of our word “spasm.”² Martha is breaking. The two words

¹ Elisabeth Johnson

² D. Mark Davis

used by Jesus refer to an uproar, to wailing, to the terror of someone falling from a window. They refer to the worry of being bound and imprisoned. Jesus looks at his friend and sees in her a tumult of anxiety and pain. He sees a woman who is weary with the pressures and expectations, weary of trying to fix everything, trying to do enough, be enough.

We feel that, don't we? We feel weary. We feel pulled in different directions. We feel trapped by expectations and pressures. We feel like Jesus is over there—with all the love and joy and everything we want—and we're stuck in the kitchen, toiling away. And we feel like if we don't, if we don't work so hard, we won't be worthy. We won't be a good mom or dad, a good friend, a good Christian. And so here we are, trying to hold everything together, when everything really is just falling apart.

In the novel *Siddhartha*, our ferryman didn't always radiate peace and enlightenment. He worked hard as a monk, only to feel empty. He worked hard as a merchant, only to feel hopeless. It is only when he falls into a deep sleep by the river that peace finds him. He doesn't find peace; peace finds him, like grace. He hears the river laugh, because he is worrying about all these things over which he has no control. He is trying to make life something that it is not, when the point is not to squeeze, and push, and force life; it's to love life, to meet life in all its contradictions, all its beauty and pain, and love it. Let it love you.

He sits by that river and he listens.

Siddhartha tells his friend, "When someone seeks, then it easily happens that his eyes see only the thing that he seeks, and he is able to find nothing, to take in nothing because he always thinks only about the thing he is seeking, because he has one goal, because he is obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: having a goal. But finding means: being free, being open, having no goal. You, O worthy one, are perhaps indeed a seeker, for in striving towards your goal, you do not see many things that are under your nose."

I imagine that Jesus is trying to say something similar to his friend Martha: There is work to be done, yes, Martha, but the best thing sometimes is to sit and listen, be it at the foot of Jesus or in the grassy shore of a river. In all your striving and all your worrying, you're so full that there's no room for anything else, no room for me.

Here is a truth that only some learn in time: What you seek cannot be found. It can only be given.

No amount of wisdom, or labor, can storm the ramparts of heaven and seize God. God has to come to you. God *is* coming to you. God is sitting in your living room, speaking with your sister, teaching her, loving her. So, join them. The meal can wait.

Again, Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't work hard or care about others; Jesus works hard; Jesus cares about others. What he's saying is that, before you go into that kitchen, you've got to start with God. God is the only sustainable, genuine source of energy and direction for what you do. You must go to the well before you drink. God is our well.

That's why we're rooting our new ministry process here at Westminster in Bible study, and shared prayer, and listening to God and to God's people. It's why our season's ministry team planned worship and simple social gatherings this summer, concerts and meals—because they're a chance to come back to the well, to reconnect.

I remember praying to God in seminary, feeling so overwhelmed, asking God what I should do. And I remember God responding by asking the question back to me: What do *you* want to do? I suddenly pictured myself hiking over a grassy hill. I immediately rejected the notion, insisting that I couldn't. How could I when so many were suffering and in need? God's response: How are you any good to them empty and worried?

I want peace and wisdom. I want justice and love. And I want to share those with others. But I can't even begin to know what they are, until I go to God and let God tell me, let God share them with me and surprise me. I have to clear my mind of all those so-important goals and worries, and let God fill me up.

That's the better part Mary has chosen: to empty ourselves and receive the grace of life—to worship, to take in a concert, to stand in the woods, to read a poem, to talk with a friend, to sit at the foot of Christ and let the world amaze you, let God startle you, let joy surprise you.

I'd like to think Martha listened that day and learned, in the words of Elisabeth Johnson, “that she is valued not for what she does or how well she does it, but for who she is as a child of God.” I'd like to think she shined, like Siddhartha, after that.

There's a legend, composed in the 13th century and often depicted in medieval art, which shows Martha—our worried, anxious, kitchen-bound, falling-apart Martha—taming a great dragon.³ The legend says that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus escaped to southern France after Jesus' death and resurrection. There, the people were terrorized by a monster, “a great dragon, half beast and half fish... having teeth sharp as a sword, and horned on either side, head like a lion, tail like a serpent, and defended with two wings on either side, and could not be beaten with cast of stones nor with other armor, and was as strong as twelve lions or bears.”⁴ The monster sank ships, and devoured armies. No man could defeat it. And then Martha showed up, and she bound it with her girdle.

Whatever we make of this crazy story, I love that people saw such strength in Martha that they cast her as dragon-tamer. Perhaps it was because Jesus had calmed that monster of anxiety in her all those years ago. He set her free. And so she is able to conquer dragons, for she has conquered—or rather, Christ has conquered in her—the greatest beast of all: the belief that we must be worthy of love.

“In him all things hold together,” says Colossians. All things hold together when Christ is at the center. All things hold together when God's grace, not our striving, is the glue. All things hold together when we know—I mean truly know—that we are loved, and accepted, and saved,

³ Suzanne Guthrie

⁴ “The Golden Legend,” Jacobus Voragine (1275)

before we ever take a breath in this life, before we ever speak a word or lift a hand. All things hold together when we sit at the foot of Jesus and listen, when we are still, and God speaks.

There will still be work to do: boats that need ferrying, meals that need cooking, people that need helping. But then, and only then, will you do so, not as a captive to worry but as a free, dragon-taming, river-listening human being, who already has all there is ever to receive: the love of God.
Amen.