

“Captive to others’ expectations”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Luke 10:38-42*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When our passage begins this morning, Jesus is walking a long road to Jerusalem, teaching and healing along the way. He’s headed—he knows this when he closes his eyes at night—to Golgotha, to a cross. But he’s not there yet. Tonight, he’s staying with two friends, Martha and Mary. They may be one of the pairs of 70 disciples he commissioned earlier in this chapter. But if they’re not disciples yet, they’re sure gonna be soon.

Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and listens to his stories. In the meantime, Martha is hard at work, preparing a meal for her guest. Maybe she heard Jesus tell the disciples at the beginning of this chapter that they should expect to be fed by the homes they enter. Maybe she heard him talk about how the harvest is plenty but the laborers few. Maybe she’s determined not to let Jesus down. But this house has no servants. It is a small place, maybe with only one room. Martha has no one to help her but Mary.

But when she finally complains to Jesus, he tells her to leave Mary alone, that Mary has “chosen the better part,” whatever that means.

Now, how many of you are thinking to yourself, “It’s not fair! Jesus always sides with Mary. That lazy, good-for-nothing, let-me-just-sit-here-while-my-sister-does-all-the-work Mary”? And how many of you are thinking, “Yeah, Jesus! You tell that bossy, work-obsessed, I’m-so-perfect-I-never-rest Martha”?

I bet I can figure out whether you’re an older or younger sibling based on your response.

I myself am often more like Martha than I am Mary. So I want to be clear: this passage is not intended to vilify Martha. We have a lot of people who, like Martha, work really hard to keep this church functioning. I need all the Marthas I can get. You know who you are...

Martha is just the sort of person Jesus prayed for a few verses earlier when he called for laborers. She’s a hard worker. And note that Jesus doesn’t criticize her for this. No, he’s concerned that she’s “worried” and “distracted.” He gently calls to her twice, saying, “Martha, Martha,” using an ancient rhetorical device that traditionally indicates compassion. He’s concerned that she’s become captive to anxiety—the fear that everything needs to be perfect. She is terribly afraid of letting people down, of not measuring up. In fact, she’s become so distracted and worried that she’s missing an opportunity to be with God.

And now she’s trying to drag Mary into this prison with her.

What she doesn't realize is that Mary is already a prisoner. Mary has the heart of a student. She wants to learn and grow. So she sits at Jesus' feet, adopting the posture of a disciple. There's just one problem. Mary is a woman in a highly patriarchal society. She's not supposed to be a disciple; she's not supposed to get an education. She's supposed to get married. Her role is in the home, in the kitchen. People are always telling her to get her head out of the clouds, to stop dreaming and be practical. They, like Martha, mistake her spirituality, her art, her freedom, for laziness and disorganization.

Most of us also know what it's like to be held captive by others' expectations. It's tiring always trying to be something you're not. Sometimes you give up fighting.

Just two weeks ago, I joined Paul and Kim Dungey, Shavonn Lynch, Bronwyn O'Connor, and about 15 people from other churches for a spiritual retreat with men incarcerated at Auburn Correctional Facility. Now I do not deny their responsibility for their actions, but I also know that many of them were never told as a child, not once, that they were smart, or gifted, or loved, or capable of anything other than their world of drugs and violence. They aren't failures; they rose exactly to the expectations everyone gave them.

It can get to where it feels like there's no way out. But there is a way out, and it's at the feet of Jesus.

When Martha tries to impose her own expectations on Mary, Jesus says, no. He refuses to allow Martha to take away from Mary her chance to be a disciple. He doesn't say that Martha is wrong to work hard or care about hospitality. In fact, we know Jesus values these things. He just says that Martha doesn't get to remake Mary in Martha's image.

Mary, he says, doesn't have to be confined by traditional gender roles or by a culture of over-productivity. And Martha, he says, doesn't have to be held captive by fear and perfection, by the tyranny of achievement and a busy life.

They are both free to become disciples, agents of God, hearers and preachers of the word.

For Jesus, the "one thing" is to pay attention to the person right in front of him, to speak the word, the love, the call, they need, whether that person is a young woman eager to be taught, or an older woman anxious and worried. For Martha and Mary, the "one thing" is to listen and to allow what is heard to free them.

Because that word received at the feet of God is powerful. It is more powerful than all the other voices in our lives. It lifts from our shoulders the expectations we carry like so many burdens.

Throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus says over and over again that the most important thing, the "better part," in fact the "only thing," is to hear and act on God's word to you. "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it," Jesus says in Luke 8:21.

In this brief story, Jesus opens Martha's eyes to see Mary, perhaps for the first time, free of the world's and her own expectations. Suddenly, she doesn't see her lazy, younger sister selfishly taking a vacation.

She sees a woman gathering at the feet of what nourishes her, what challenges and inspires, and then choosing the great labor of becoming a disciple, even after Jesus has warned that the journey will be perilous and difficult. Martha finally sees her sister; she sees a woman becoming an agent of learning, and of change, in her community.

Though we never see how Mary rises up and acts as a disciple, the Gospels offer other examples. Consider, for instance, the Samaritan Woman in the Gospel of John, who, after listening to Jesus, goes on to preach the gospel, become a leader in her community, and invite others to believe in Christ.

How will God speak with you, as you let go of all that you thought you'd be and perhaps see yourself for the first time? What calling—denied by the world, denied maybe even by you—will God empower? Because, when God looks at you, God doesn't see the world's expectations; God sees a child wondrously made, with power and spirit and beauty you have yet to imagine. God has a plan for you, a word, a vision that cannot be restrained by this world; all we need do is take a seat and listen.

Two weeks ago, in the prison, I heard testimony after testimony of incarcerated men who found strength, compassion, gentleness, wisdom, and vocation in Christ. They hugged and sang and prophesied without restraint. They spoke with me about the intricacies of Scripture and faith. They told me their dreams—one wants to be a barber, another a gospel singer, another a father for his four-year-old son, another a preacher, another wants to go back to school. One man told me how he had transformed volatile, dangerous situations by responding with humility and kindness, like Christ himself. These men prayed for Emerson, and celebrated his adoption.

The world expected prisoners, but I saw only free men.

Because the truth is we may sit down at the feet of Christ as slaves, prisoners of others' expectations, but we stand up as free men and women, hearers and doers of the Word. What will Christ say to you? **Amen.**