

“Worried and Distracted About Many Things”

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way,
Jesus entered a certain village,
where a woman named Martha
welcomed him into her home.

She had a sister named Mary,
who sat at the Lord's feet
and listened to what he was saying.

But 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.”

But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha,
you are worried and distracted by many things;
there is need of only one thing.
Mary has chosen the better part,
which will not be taken away from her.”

Worried and Distracted About Many Things

Luke 10:38-42

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Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

Though every Sunday is unique, as the Spirit of God is constantly up to some form of hijinks such that you just never know what will happen when you come to worship, this Sunday is particularly so. This morning, in Canton, we will have our regular show, broadcast live in front of a studio audience. Afterward, Ellen Grayson and I will pack up the circus tents and take the show on the road to the Daily Ridge Presbyterian Church where I will have the distinct pleasure of leading worship, celebrating the sacrament of Baptism, welcoming new members into the congregation and, afterward, Ellen and I will break bread with the good people there in what is known as the "Piecemeal Palace; which is how they affectionately refer to their Fellowship building which is located right next to their historic, wood stove heated church.

II.

Given all this, today's sermon will need to do double-duty in speaking to the individual journey of each congregation, but also the shared journey we make together as sister churches in the Presbytery of Northern New York, as well as sisters and brothers in Christ. I am going to begin this morning by telling you a quirky little thing. Then, I'm going to tell you story about two women, Edna and Adele, and "the blue-haired Bible study ladies." Afterward, I will share with you a "self-truth," offer a confession, tell you a very long story during which I will throw the Presbytery under the bus, ask for your forgiveness, and, last but not least, challenge all of us be wise in choosing the better part.

III.

So, without further introduction or adieu here is the quirky thing: I do *not* memorize scripture. It isn't that I *can't* memorize Scripture, I certainly am able, I just *choose* not to. This may seem quite a small matter, but there is very big reason for it. When we memorize scripture, we tend to also memorize our interpretation *of* that scripture which we held *at the time*. While it is great to be able to quickly reference some scripture passage relevant to the moment,

locking in one interpretation of that passage prevents you from seeing a different or deeper meaning in other, often less obvious, moments. This denies the Gospel the fluidity within which it best thrives (in my opinion).

I grew up in a conservative, evangelical Presbyterian Church where memorizing scripture was not only a form of duty to the Gospel, it also served as an old-school badge of honor. It was among the most caring and loving group of people I have ever met; until it lost that fluidity and, then, not so much. Still, I owe much to them in helping me realize that at the end of the day the whole “church thing” sinks or swims based on the degree to which it stays focused, first and foremost, on *the people in the pews*. Church is *all* about the people in the pews; those who currently reside there, and those who some day might.

IV.

By way of example, whenever I have to preach on today’s Scripture reading from Luke 10, the story of Mary and Martha, I have to struggle mightily to maintain a fluidity about the meaning the passage may have for us in *this* present moment, owing to a previously memorized interpretation from my childhood. You see, when I was a kid, I lived right in back of my maternal grandmother, Adele Lyon, who lived one street over from us. We had abutting backyards, and a poured concrete sidewalk leading through our yard to hers. I was over at her house *all* the time, often for meals, but also just to hang out. No person has had a bigger impact on my emotional and spiritual formation than my Gram. Adele was the first person who taught me the value of what I would later call a “ministry of hospitality.” She opened her home and set out a table for countless people over the years, resulting in a powerful witness to the welcome and love Christ offers.

V.

Gram was a hard-core church goer, attending each and every Sunday, sitting in the very same pew up in the balcony. On the occasions I attend worship with her, rather than go off to Sunday school, she keep me from fidgeting by offering me a Certs candy from the seemingly endless supply she kept in her purse. Once a month, for as long as I can remember, my Gram hosted a Bible study in her home attended by about 25 or 30 older ladies; whom I always referred to as “the blue-haired Bible study ladies.” I’d come home from school one day and, as usual, head straight for Gram’s house for a

tasty snack only to find the street in front of her house lined with parked cars on both sides of the street. At that point, I would give myself the proverbial slap on the forehead, “Oh yeah, Bible study day,” and I’d mosey on home to reluctantly fix myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

VI.

Except not always. Sometimes I’d head back over the sidewalk right when I knew the lesson part had ended and the tea and goody time was beginning. Boy oh boy, did Adele put on a spread. I’d walk in to find Gram busy in the kitchen and there would be chair after chair lined against every wall of the house, with the women occupying them laughing, talking and passing enormous trays of cookies, brownies and other forms deliciousness. They were always happy to see me, and greeted me with a great warmth. My Gram hosted this Bible study for years, for decades in fact, and they had all watched me grow up. In hindsight, though, I realize they knew that I was really there for the goodies. It was a very powerful and eclectic group of women, representing a variety of churches, each one gritty and grace-filled in her own right and in her own way. As always, in the far right corner, sitting in my Gram’s green velvet chair sat Edna Schultz, the woman who always gave the lesson.

VII.

How or why this monthly Bible study began, with so many women from such a variety of backgrounds, I unfortunately have no idea. What I do know, however, is that this group all understood Edna to be the Mary in the situation, with Adele occupying the role of Martha. Unlike today’s scripture reading, however, where we find dissension between the two, Edna and Adele each understood and welcomed their unique role: Edna would teach the lesson and Adele would tend to the kitchen. My experience of those monthly Bible studies helped me to realize that the issue between Mary and Martha wasn’t about a greater value being ascribed to Mary’s decision to sit at Jesus’ feet over Martha’s labors in the kitchen, it was about the importance of each one of us, as followers of Christ, respecting each other in finding our own “better part” as a means of serving the Gospel. Though Edna occupied the central role, the ladies always understood this to be “Adele’s Bible study.”

VIII.

Now we come to the part in the sermon where I share with you a “self-truth.” We are all on a journey to discover who we are; that is, the unique child of God we’ve been created to be. One of the things I’ve had to accept about *myself* is that I tend to see the world in terms of black or white, right or wrong, this or that; and I’m very quick to draw such conclusions and, then, proceed accordingly. Upon occasion, I certainly have been wrong about a few of the conclusions I’ve drawn, but over the course of my life I’ve learn to both trust my instincts while still accepting that other people may never see things the same way I do; or, if they eventually do, it may not come to them as quickly. I tell you all of this so as to temper what I’m about to say. That I stand here today before you as a Presbyterian minister, as I’m sure the blue-haired Bible study ladies would agree, is nothing short of a miracle; and, in no way of my own making.

IX.

While I certainly appreciate *Presbyterianism*, I confess that throughout my life the specific *Presbyteries* to which I’ve belonged have made me *crazy*; always have and, I imagine, always will. Which, I suppose, is only fair, as I suspect many of those who constitute the Presbytery think I’m pretty crazy as well. You know what, though? That’s just fine. We are all called to serve the Gospel with uniqueness; to find our own “better way.”

What gets my goat, though, is that time and time again, it has been my experience that the Presbytery gets locked into one interpretation of what the Church needs to be and, then, devolves into a state of worry and distraction about *far* too many things and fails to keep focused on the people in the pews; both those of today and those of someday.

X.

While I could cite too many examples of this from my own ministry and the past 23 years I’ve spent in this Presbytery (and a larger part of me would very much like to do so) I’m going to offer just one; as one will certainly suffice. For a great many years I was the Moderator of the Daily Ridge Session. This was while Rev. Michael Sedore was pastor. Typically, the pastor is also the Session Moderator. However, the Moderator must also be a minister a member of the Presbytery. Since Rev. Sedore was an American Baptist minister, the

Presbytery's Commission on Ministry appointed me to be the Moderator. For all those years I would drive over Dailey Ridge for quarterly Session meetings or the annual congregational meeting, and I while I would serve as the "official" *Moderator*, I encouraged and allowed Rev. Sedore to do the *moderating*; after all, he was the pastor. This arrangement, I will admit, was not typical (that is to say it was unique) and was wholly of my own making. A case of allowing the Gospel some fluidity.

XI.

You know what, though? It worked! For the years of Rev. Sedore's pastorate the Dailey Ridge Church more than survived, it *thrived*. Though it would always be a "small country church," this was by design and desire; with the result being a mighty ministry which made a disproportionately large impact on the lives of the congregation and the people in its neck of the woods out there in the middle of nowhere. All this, to me, was a source of *great* inspiration. I would sit in meetings at Dailey Ridge and simply be amazed at all that the congregation was able to accomplish; and, over the course of those many years, I got far more from the folks there than I gave. Then, one day, Rev. Sedore retired. He'd been making the trek from his home in Canada for a long time, he was getting older (a process hastened by the wear and tear of being an ardent Pittsburgh Steeler fan) and the time had come for him to enjoy his Golden Years.

XII.

Now, the period of transition from one pastor to another is always a challenge for any congregation. I knew, though, this would particularly be the case for a smaller church like Dailey Ridge, which would need to find a very part-time pastor. So, rather than report all this to the Commission On Ministry or COM (which, apparently and as you will see, is what they would have preferred me to do) I started to get things lined up to search for a new pastor. Frankly, and not to mince words, I feared if I didn't first get the next pastor in place *first* the COM would insert itself and screw it up (which, as it turns out, is *exactly* what they did). The next thing I know, however, I receive an email from the chair of the COM unceremoniously telling me I was no longer the Moderator at Dailey Ridge; thank you very much for your years of service, *we* will take it from here.

XIII.

How and why this might have come to be, I will admit, is pure conjecture on my part as I was never offered any explanation. I think what happened, though, it is that around this same time I had lunch with a Methodist minister who wasn't serving a congregation and who I thought might be a possibility as the next pastor at the Dailey Ridge church. However, this person was married to another Methodist minister who, unbeknownst to me, was friends with a Presbyterian minister who, at the time, was the chair of the COM. Soon after that lunch, I received the aforementioned email.

It seems that the chair (who has since left the area) after having set fire to their own church, had a little spare time and decided to also scorch the Dailey Ridge Church just for good measure. So, for the past several years Dailey Ridge was left to flounder. While I certainly still provided support wherever and whenever I could, I pretty much had to sit by, play the long game, and trust the Spirit.

XIV.

Now remember, I already told you I tend to understand things in terms of black or white, right or wrong, this or that; and I'm very quick to draw such conclusions and, then, proceed accordingly. There are always two sides to every story (at least). I relate my side of this story here today for two reasons. First, because we must always honor our history; that is, to be truthful in its telling and up-front in dealing with it. People have a right, and a need, to know from whence they have come. Both as a matter of respect, but, also, because we can only chart a course to our future if we understand our past and what has brought us to this present moment.

XV.

Second, I've told you all of this because an apology is due to the Dailey Ridge Church. After being in this Presbytery for almost a quarter of a century, I can tell you it's chock-full of pure-hearted, well-intentioned, hard working, committed and decent folk who always try to do their best. With respect to the Dailey Ridge Church these past few years, however, clearly such a best simply was not good enough. So, on behalf of my fellow Presbyters, this morning during my sermon at the Dailey Ridge Church, I'm going to tell them that we are profoundly sorry for dropping the ball. Further, I'm going to

pledge that from here on out, we (the Presbytery) *will* do better by them; beginning here, and beginning today. That is *precisely* the point of the Gospel: each new day is an opportunity to forgive, to heal, to listen, to love, to try harder, to begin anew.

XVI.

That is, so long as we honor the fluidity the Gospel deserves. That we each get to choose our own “better way” to serve the risen Christ; be it as a Mary, a Martha and every way in-between. We just need to be wise in choosing, and not allow ourselves to get locked into one interpretation of how we should be THE Church, or be a Presbytery, or be a congregation. The Spirit will surely lead us to the future God intends. We just need to stop be worried and distracted about (so) many things, and keep ourselves focused on *you*, the people in the pews. Those here today, and those who will someday, through God’s leading, join you. Amen.