

“Your Presence Is Requested”  
Luke 10:38-42  
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Preached Sunday, July 22 at San José, Costa Rica

I think it is pretty clear that Jesus was what we call today, “a people person.” From the portrayals we have received, he seems genuinely interested in the people he meets, and who seek him out. He was always engaged in some sort of conversation with someone. He would have been a nightmare for the Secret Service, that corps of Presidential attendants charged with protecting the Commander-in-Chief, because he was always engaging people a little too closely, breaching the buffer zone that provides a measure of safety for the time it gives the guardians a chance to react to any perceived threats. Jesus was such a people person that he made his presence felt even among the terrorists of his day, the glue and gas huffing addicts, the streetcorner, panhandling street urchins, and the AIDS patients, the kind of people even the most ardent “people person” of today finds hard to embrace. But one day he found himself invited to be a guest of a fairly typical family, whose names have been recorded for us as Mary and Martha. Let’s listen to what happened that day. (Read Luke 10:38-42)

The story of Mary and Martha has been more thoroughly dissected than most other Biblical passages I think because it contains that most uncomfortable of moments in which the best of intentions are cast aside with the flick of a wrist, when the gifts one dedicated servant is trying to bring for someone she loves, or at

least admires, are seemingly relegated to nothingness by their intended recipient. We want to affirm both Mary's and Martha's gifts to Jesus, Mary's devotion, and Martha's hospitality, and since we see the value of both, our sense of fairness wants to somehow soften the blow to Martha's dignity. It may be true that she has gone not just the extra mile, but perhaps two miles too many, but I, at least, hope that even my most over-the-top hospitality is never met with such scorn. That she brought Jesus' comment on herself by asking him to relieve her anxiety instead of finding a more creative solution, does little to change the fact that Martha's sincere, if self-propelled, efforts weren't valued the way she might have hoped. Pobrequita.

This is a story which does not just invite speculation on the internal motivations and emotional dynamics of the characters, but practically begs for it. The vagueness of Martha's tasks, and her relationship with Mary, and the "one needful thing" offer us an opportunity to live the story ourselves, since the story is not one as far from our own experiences as some other Biblical tales. And so, let's have a little fun this evening with this opportunity. We are told that Martha was distracted by her many tasks, and the original Greek word suggests that she was "pulled in many directions." But what exactly was she doing? We may presume she was preparing a meal, perhaps her best meal, but what was she serving that led her to be so distracted? What *was* that menu?

Let's start with the appetizers. Perhaps as a starter course, Martha knew the recipe for preparing a Paté of Preoccupation, but in the end she likely would have chosen those little, bite-sized "Self-doubt Sandwiches," the kind where a layer of insecurity is placed between two slices of emotional immaturity. The insecurity comes in a variety of flavors, including fear of being criticized, fear of not being loved, fear of not being "good enough," and many others. These are not very nutritious sandwiches and they take a very long time to prepare, but they are very popular menu items. We are not given the specific ingredients of the "sandwiches" that Martha was making, but they definitely kept her so busy she could not make it to the table with Mary and Jesus. That is what self-doubt does; it keeps us so occupied with thinking about what other people are thinking about us, that we never get around to learning about our real value in God's eyes, the only eyes that matter, and then coming to terms with that. As I said, we may not know exactly what Martha was using for her filling, but we know what we put in our own self-doubt sandwiches, and they are not any tastier today than they were in Jesus time.

For the soup course, there were probably several options, including a "Bruised Ego Bisque" and a "Viscious Vichyssoise," but Martha likely would have settled for a good old fashioned "Chicken Little Soup," also called "Henny Penny Soup," the one that tastes remarkably like the world is coming to an end. You may remember the fable of poor Chicken Little who whipped up all of her animal friends into a frenzy after an acorn fell on her head and she neglected to confirm

her fears that the sky was falling. Perhaps the pressure of having the notable Rabbi Jesus in her home led her to imagine all sorts of shame-producing scenarios, many of which could have been, to her in her context, world-ending, especially if she couldn't live up to the expectations of hospitality that others likely had placed upon her. She had a lot to lose. You may remember that Chicken Little's efforts at sharing her anxiety were so successful that all of her friends were eaten by the manipulative Foxy Loxy who took advantage of the hysteria. In making her Chicken Little Soup, Martha's lack of courage at standing up to her sister, or her lack of courage to do just a little bit less, created a level of anxiety that made it impossible for her to approach the table, and almost impossible for Mary to sit at the feet of Jesus. What a shame *that* would have been.

For the main course, she may have been preparing her famous Stew of Self-Righteousness, the one full of ingredients like pride, denial, and delusion. As with all stews, the ingredients are cooked so long that they all kind of blend together, both in consistency and taste, and in Martha's case, a bitter taste. It seems clear that she had come to believe that serving Jesus with her culinary and housekeeping gifts was a higher calling than that of her sister who had chosen the position of disciple at the Rabbi's feet. It is not hard to see why the resentment built up in her, because that's what self-righteousness will do for you, because self-righteousness usually leads to a belief in self sufficiency, and self-sufficiency means you end up doing everything yourself (because no one can do it as well as you), and then,

when you get in over your head, you wonder where everyone is, and then you complain and feel resentful and generally feel too tired to do much of anything, much less listen to the Rabbi. The Stew of Self-righteousness uses up a lot of energy in its preparation, energy which can be fruitfully invested elsewhere.

Well, alongside the main course was the salad, and for this Martha probably chose that age-old classic, Bitter Lettuce Salad, over the also popular Wilted Worry Salad. Bitter Lettuce Salad is composed of three types of lettuces, “Let us whisper,” “let us gossip,” and “let us keep secrets” and is served with a nice, 100% vinegar dressing that really has a good, sharp bite to it. This salad is prepared in dark corners of the kitchen, far away from the subject matter of the conversation, usually with people who are willing sympathizers with the cook. Today’s story is brief and with few details, but it is not at all hard to imagine Martha sharing her resentment with her friends or helpers. You see, even though Martha’s claim is that she is left to do all the work herself, it is far more likely that she simply doesn’t want to let Mary get away with doing nothing at all. This is a household with enough means to host someone like Jesus and perhaps all of his disciples and thus would have had servants or at least curious friends. And so, as they tore apart the lettuce in the back of the kitchen, they tore apart Mary behind her back. Now, you may not know this about Bitter Lettuce Salad, but its preparation is known to rub off on the cook, and the whispers and the secrets and the gossip become a invisible

but very divisive presence at the table, making it hard for the guests to even listen, much less talk freely amongst themselves.

Last, but not least there was dessert, a wonderful Pessimist Plum Pudding, a dense combination of three interesting flavors: one part disappointment about the past, one part expired hope in the future, and one part tension about the present. It's really the perfect complement to the rest of the menu. From Martha's perspective, it might have been a very threatening thing to see her sister seated at the feet of Jesus, if she knew anything about what a life as a disciple was like. If she thought it was hard enough getting along without Mary's help for this one night, imagine what her life would be like if Mary decided to leave everything, like the other disciples had, to follow Jesus? The longer Mary sat at Jesus' feet, the dimmer Martha's hope became, even though the option was available to her also. And so, as pessimists tend to do, Martha wants to drag down everyone with her, and so she tries to drag Mary away from the table, to pull her away from the gravitational orbit into which Jesus has pulled her. If she can't find her way to the table, she'll make sure the table is empty.

Now, Jesus was no dummy. He could smell what was cooking in the kitchen and it was not a menu to his liking. In fact, this was the very kind of menu he was teaching against as he sat in the house in which it was being prepared. You see, the gist of Jesus' message is that there is hope of life without self-doubt, without fear and anxiety, without self-righteousness, without bitterness, without despair, all the

things which Martha seems to embody as she busies herself in the service of Jesus. This passage is not, as has been often interpreted, setting contemplation over service, exalting the intellect over the work of the hands, but rather it is about the presence and proximity of Christ in whatever we do. I think that what Jesus desired most then, and desires most today, is that whether as host or guest, we sit at the table with him. Think about invitations you have received to be a guest at someone's party. The formal ones often begin, "Your presence is requested" at such and such type of party, whether it be a wedding, anniversary, birthday or whatever. You are being invited, at least if the host's motives are pure, because he or she wants to spend time with you, wants you to share in that important moment of their life, wants you to be present as a witness, as a friend, to share in the experience. The invitation is not really to a party but to deepen or at least sustain a relationship. An invitation itself speaks to its own purpose best when it includes those words, "Your presence is requested..."

Now remember that it is Mary and Martha who have invited Jesus to their home, who have requested his presence among them. Now, I don't know about you, but some of the worst parties I've ever been to are those in which I barely get to greet the host, much less spend any significant time with them. I've put on my best bowtie, I've driven across town, I've perhaps brought a gift, and then when I arrive, I find I'm pretty much superfluous to the host who is either spending time with other people, or with the caterer, making sure that all the details of hospitality

are being dealt with efficiently and effectively. Even though my presence has been requested, it hasn't really been honored, at least not with the hope with which I accepted in the first place, namely to deepen my relationship with the host. I thought I was important to the person who invited me, but it turned out the other guests, or the quiches, were more important.

Mary, it seems, has understood better than her sister the essence of true hospitality and practices its finer points as she sits at Jesus' feet. Martha was not inhospitable to Jesus, far from it, but the practice of her hospitality left out the key ingredient. You see, as a guest, and as a people person, there is nothing more that Jesus would have wanted than to have *both* Mary and Martha present with him at that table. The great irony and teaching of this passage is that Jesus, as the guest, not the host, but as the guest, is the one who says, "Your presence is requested..." His rebuke of Martha, the reminder that there is a "need of only one thing," was offered to encourage Martha to learn the practice of the kind of divine hospitality Christ practiced, whether as guest or host. He is teaching her the meaning of the invitation, the purpose of the feast. He is revealing to her his desire to know her for all of her depth as a child of God, not just as a good cook or household manager. He wants to know her hopes and fears, her dreams and challenges, her experiences of loving God and loving neighbor. He simply wants her to present with him, as he is with her.

Whatever menu Martha cooked up that day, it likely had some combination of the emotional ingredients I had some fun with, because those are the emotions we are all constantly dealing with as we make our way through the years God has given us. Mary probably had many of those same fears and doubts, but she was able to set them aside and draw near to her guest. Martha let them keep her away from the table. The irony is that it was the very thing Jesus was teaching at the table was what Martha most needed to hear, and yet she could not approach. I don't mean that Jesus was doing family therapy, but that his presence and his focus on the reign of God are the very things that can put to rest our anxiety, our fear, our doubt. Christ is the only power stronger than all those things which keep us from enjoying God's presence. As we who have chosen to make Christ a guest in our hearts and lives, may we take full advantage of his presence there by being hospitable to him through our presence with others, inviting them into relationship by saying "Your presence is required" and then truly being present with them. Amen.