

I don't know if you have seen any of the images from the James Webb Space telescope that NASA has released over the last week or so, but they are truly awe inspiring. This is the sharpest image of the deep universe that human beings have ever seen. What you are looking at is the galaxy cluster SMACS 0723, which contains thousands of galaxies. Our galaxy, the Milky Way, is over 100,000 light-years in diameter. A single light-year is 5.88 trillion miles. My mind cannot comprehend such a vast distance, and this image contains thousands of galaxies, capturing light from 4.6 billion years ago. Most incredibly to me, this image captures a portion of the night sky approximately the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length. The universe really big and really old. We are all babies in comparison. Here's an image of the Carina Nebula, which is the edge of a nearby, young, star-forming region. In the face of such beauty, awe, and scope, suddenly my annoyance over who didn't finish the dishes or who said something mean to me doesn't seem that important. Images like these clarify how very small I am, and how infinitesimally short our time on earth really is. How am I going to spend the little time I have in this vast, beautiful cosmos? That's what our passage from Luke today is about.

Luke's story of Mary and Martha is familiar and problematic. Often when we hear about it, we fall into tired stereotypes of two sisters fighting with each other over a man's attention. I don't think that is what's going on here. Having just finished the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus and his band of merry disciples enter a village where Martha takes them in. This is no small thing. Earlier in this same chapter, Jesus is accompanied by over 70 disciples, so we are left to assume that's who shows up at Martha's door—talk about a big table. When was the last time you threw a party for more than 70 people? Was it easy and stress free, or did it take a lot of preparation and work?

Hospitality in the ancient world was a really big deal. Two weeks ago, we heard in Luke chapter 9 that Jesus entered a Samaritan village, and they do not welcome him. James and John were so angry at this that asked Jesus if they could call down fire from heaven, just like at Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis. Though Jesus rebukes their plan, James and John's anger demonstrates how significant inhospitality was, which is why the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 was not being gay, but inhospitality. Here we are one chapter later, and Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. Before we get all judgey with Martha, we must first honor her hospitality. She welcomed Jesus as a guest, and we dare not shame her for it.

Martha also appears in John's Gospel, where she is one of Jesus most faithful disciples. Before we hear the rest of this story, we do well to take a moment and thank God for all the Martha's in our lives, those people, often women, who open their heart and home in hospitality. How many of you have received the blessing of hard-working people, often women, who see to it that you are fed and cared for? While I don't think this text is about gender roles, when it comes to hospitality, it is often women who bear the burden and receive little gratitude or help. I suspect we could all do a better job of expressing gratitude to the people who work so hard to us fed and sheltered. Here at Covenant, all of you who deliver groceries through our SOS Food Pantry, those of you who prepare and deliver meals at CATCH Court, Hoge, Open Shelter, and the Ronald McDonald House every month, thank you. There is so much hospitality that is shown by the people of Covenant to feed and care for people week in and week out, it's incredible. To all of you Martha's, women and men alike, who serve others with gifts of hospitality, thank you. We don't say it enough.

Martha welcomes Jesus and his entourage into her home, and then the conflict unfolds. Martha's sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him instead of helping Martha with the meal. Now, there are different ways of interpreting this. Some people think that Mary is embodying the feminine ideal by silently listening to Jesus, while Martha's active role as host threatened traditional gender roles. Others read it the exact opposite way, that by sitting at Jesus' feet instead of helping in the kitchen, Mary was occupying space normally held by men. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, which what a student did before their Rabbi, especially if you were a Rabbi in training. By sitting with the men, perhaps Mary is challenging the stereotype that women belong in the kitchen and instead she takes her place alongside Jesus' male disciples.

Now, which one of these readings is correct? I don't know. In fact, I don't think we can know for sure, and maybe that's OK. Gender is present in this story, but I don't think it's the point. What we can be sure of is that like Martha, all of us find ourselves upset over what other people are doing. While Mary listened to Jesus, Luke says, "Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal." That word "preoccupied" means dragged around and pulled in many directions. Can any of you relate to that? How many of you feel that on a given day, you are pulled in so many different directions that you end up lashing out at other people for what are ultimately your own problems and feelings? Some of you are thinking, I may have done that already this morning. I know. It's OK. We all do.

Martha is upset, and perhaps with good reason. Just getting everyone fed, clothed, and where they need to be on a given Tuesday is a minor miracle, isn't it? It's not easy to keep all the plates spinning. And as do it, you may notice that other people are not working as hard as you are, and often times, you're right. They aren't. How does that make you feel? Do you feel grateful for the opportunity to serve other people and for the gift of being alive? Do you remember that your time here is short, and it's not worth spending a moment of it on resentment? Or do you like Martha feel as though other people need to pull their weight? She says to Jesus, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me." I can hear myself saying this. God will you please open the eyes of those around me to see how hard I'm working and that it might inspire them to do the same? Have you ever prayed that? If you have, you're not alone, but it's also no way to live. We are never healthy or happy when we spend the little time we have here worried about how other people are spending what little time they have.

Jesus responds to Martha's concern by saying, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her." I wonder how you hear Jesus' tone in this verse. I don't hear an ounce of shame, or scolding. What I hear is Jesus inviting Martha to get some perspective, to remember what really matters, and he's inviting us to do the same. When I get bent out of shape and pulled in different directions, Jesus looks at me and says, "Joel, Joel, while you are worried and distracted by whatever headline or annoyance that caught your attention today, you are missing out on what really matters. Is that how you want to spend the precious time you have?"

Worry and distraction always take us out of the present moment. Mary is soaking up the moment in a contemplative gaze of love and wonder. She's basking in the glory of the Christ, the divine that is present in her midst.

The early church experienced the divine presence that undergirds all things in things in the face of Jesus. They called this presence the Christ. Paul says that Christ is before all things and all things are held together in Christ, which means that presence is all around us. When we come into the divine presence, which is the present moment, suddenly our worries and distractions seem less important, don't they? In fact, they fade away. Here's reality, your time here is brief. There are many things over which you have no control, including how other people spend their time and energy. You can't control that. If you try, you'll spend your life worried and distracted, but you do have a say in how you spend your time and energy. In fact, no one can take that away from you. Each moment, you are surrounded by divine energy, and held together by divine love, and only one thing is necessary for you to see it. Attend to that one thing, and it will not be taken away from you.