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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

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Series: “Hands Free, Hearts Open, God First”

Message: “What Really Matters Here?”

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

Today we’re thinking about the question, “What really matters here?”

When you look back on situations and experiences in life, as you tell a story about that moment, one emotion dominates.

Even when the rest of the day or the experience was good, and was intended to be a special time, even just a few minutes of stress, anger, frustration, or harsh words can color the whole experience and change the way it is remembered.

I can remember a trip to the zoo like that from when I was young. It included grandparents and aunts and uncles. It was supposed to be a wonderful day. But one miss step and an embarrassing angry exchange and the whole day turned awkward. What was intended as a time to create wonderful family members turned into a difficult experience and memory.

But there are moments when the opposite is true. When you are fully in the moment, when you can overlook or laugh at a misstep, things are not going to plan, when you give the gift of yourself and despite these moments, you have beautiful memories.

Rachael Macy Stafford describes the power of this sort of moment: “When you offer a moment, you offer a piece of yourself. And although you may not know it at the time, the recipient holds tightly to that piece of you. And when the waves of life come tumbling down, it is that piece of you that gives them strength to keep standing.

What really matters here? Or, when we think back on this situation, how do we want to be remembered? Do we want to be remembered as stressed out, tired, grumpy, prone to explode in anger, having to have everything perfect, always negative? Or do we want to be remembered as a blessing, fully present, glad to be with you, enjoying the gift of the moment?

Do we want to be remembered as Mary or Martha?

Martha, who got herself so upset over the situation that she embarrassed herself, her sister and their guests…a situation still remembered as awkward even today.

Or Mary, who broke the rules and was present to the gift of the moment and sat at Jesus’ feet like the male disciples.

This is a story that we would probably like to avoid because not only is it still awkward 2,000 years later, but also because most of us can identify with Martha in some way, whether we try to do too much and stress ourselves out, whether we are jealous of a sibling, or whether we have opened out mouth and spoken a little too harshly. We can identify.

The story starts well. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, to face the cross. As he and the disciples pass through their village, Martha opens her home to them, a wonderful act of hospitality.

This is a huge honor, to host Jesus. They live in a society where hospitality is very important. And Jesus has emphasized this value in his teaching as he has sent out the 70 and in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Martha steps up to live out this value. And in doing this, she is able to draw on her spiritual gifts. This is her area, her love language. And so, of course, the house is already clean. And as she begins to cook, the others can hardly focus it smells so good.

And Mary knows her role—to stay out of the way and not mess anything up. Her gift is to answer the door and make everyone comfortable.

Martha’s standard is high and she wants the very best for Jesus. But as she wants to give Jesus her best, she keeps adding more to her to do list. And suddenly she finds herself rushed, overwhelmed, and isolated. She has created a vision that she cannot achieve on her own.

And she is thinking, “I’m swamped here. Can’t they see that?” And every ten minutes someone else comes to the door and Mary invites them in for dinner.

She gets herself more and more worked up. Don’t they care about me? Why do I always have to do the work around here?

But they’re all thinking, Martha’s in there where she loves to be, using her gifts. What a wonderful hostess she is. We can’t wait for dinner.

But really, they were just happy to be there, in this home full of welcome, sitting at Jesus’ feet. She could have served them day old bread and they would have been happy.

Mary does her part. She answers the door, gets chairs, and makes everyone welcome. But as Jesus begins to speak, just like everyone else, she is captivated. She can’t help but sit down, like the disciples, and listen with her whole being.

Martha, hands full of bread, face flushed with cooking and resentment rising in her, overwhelmed by her vision that was too big and too burdensome passed by the door and saw Mary sitting there, listening, and deep within she knew that she was the one missing out.

And in this moment she had a choice:

She could be glad her home is the location of such a special moment and be honored that she could be the hostess.

She could realize that even if she served leftovers that this crowd would be happy because they are there with Jesus and he is offering them the bread of life.

She could realize that it would be okay if she pushed dinner back a little while and came in and joined them. Just a few minutes wouldn’t hurt.

Or, she could let her resentment boil over into embarrassing words, having a fit, and being a tattle tale….which is what she does.

And we can’t blame her too much because we completely understand. We’ve all been there…a few different details, but the same story.

We have the choice to give in to our scenario of anger, resentment, and self-justification, ruining the moment, what could have been the most perfect day.

But too often we are like Martha. Our hands are too full of grand plans to make everything perfect. But as we work hard to implement our vision, we find our hands are too full and our bodies and minds too tired to enjoy it. And unless we’re willing to admit we need help, to change our vision, or to laugh at ourselves, we ruin that perfect moment we were working so hard for, for ourselves and others. There’s no room for the Holy Spirit to move, to take what has been given and bless the moment.

How do we want to be remembered? Surely as those who have enough perspective to realize what is most important in this moment.

Elizabeth Johnson writes, “It is true, that much of our busyness and distraction stems from the noblest of intentions…Yet, if all our activities leave us with no time to be still in the Lord’s presence and hear God’s word, we are likely to end up anxious and troubled. We are likely to end up with a kind of service that is devoid of love and joy and is resentful of others.”

There is another way. We open our hands and let go. We open our hearts to receive love and laughter and the gift of the Holy Spirit alive in that moment. The Holy Spirit which has the power to turn a disaster into a moment of connection, of love, to make it a moment that will be a blessing for years to come.

If Martha had only been able to do this, maybe the story would read differently:

“Martha opened her home to Jesus. And while she was there, she and her sister Mary sat at his feet and then everyone enjoyed a fabulous feast prepared by Martha. And Jesus praised her saying, Martha, you have chosen the one thing needed and you have showed the gift of hospitality as well. You have helped us share in the Kingdom of God.

The good news, again in the words of Elizabeth Johnson is this: “Jesus invites all of us who are worried and distracted by many things to sit and rest in his presence, to hear his words of grace and truth, to know that we are loved and valued as children of God, to be renewed in faith and strengthened by service. There is need of only one thing: attention to our guest. As it turns out, our guest Jesus is also our host, with abundant gifts to give.”