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The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

"Mary and Martha



I want you to think with me for a few moments about the nature of anxiety. There are some things in every life, and many things in some lives, that cause us real, genuine, and in some cases, constant distress. We may have a job we love and rely on, and suspect it's going to be snatched away from us; we may have a brother we care about, and we sense he's going to be sent to prison; we may have a close friend, and we fear her increasing forgetfulness suggests early signs of dementia.

What these anxieties have in common is a deep-seated fear that the things we value are in jeopardy and the things we need are likely to run out. It's a profound mistrust that leads us to believe the things that matter can't be relied upon, that there won't finally be enough, and that we'll come to be isolated, bereft, vulnerable, and exposed.

Such apprehension makes us prime targets for the advertiser who says, 'Shouldn't you get insurance for that, to give you peace of mind,' or by a politician who says, 'What makes you think you can trust those people – they're out to steal your money, take your jobs, devalue your home.'

Our anxiety leads us in a number of directions that don't help us, but nonetheless come to characterize our life. One of those is envy. Envy names the way we cease to value what we have and know, and come only to prize what belongs to others. In our anxiety we neglect to cherish what we are and have, and brood over what lies out of reach and in our imagination constitutes a key that opens the door to where all the candy lies.

Another such wrong direction is greed. Greed is the impulse to fear that we won't have enough, and that what we do have is unreliable – a fear that urges to accumulate what we don't need, can't enjoy, and will sooner or later undermine or displace what rightly belongs to us. What is Facebook, if not a taking-comfort in many virtual friends as insurance lest the much smaller number of real friends prove inadequate in times of plenty or famine?

And a third direction in which anxiety draws us is endless deferral, which leads us to maximize our sense of power by surrounding ourselves with options and choices, but never actually settling on one, for fear that in the death of the endlessly possible we may experience the demise of our supplies of hope. When we say we are busy, are we really just saying that in our greed we have drawn around us too many things, in our pride

we have assumed those things can only be done well by us, in our sloth we have not sat down and identified which are the most important, and in our deferral we have not wanted to let go of any of them lest one day we might come to regret it? Thus anxiety is the root of most of the deadly sins, transforming what we are and have from a gift to a curse, and distorting our notion of God from a superabundant source of grace to an untrustworthy curmudgeon of scarcity.

And that's what's going on in the background when Luke tells us, 'Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.' People sometimes get angry about this story. Most often it's because they see in Mary a stereotype of the passive, submissive female, and in Martha a type of the assertive, dynamic woman, and they're alarmed to find that Jesus praises the one and upbraids the other. But that's to introduce hurt and prejudice that isn't in the story. Gender stereotyping has done great harm in the history of the church and world over the centuries. But this story is more subtle than that.

What's fascinating about the story is that everyone's a transgressor. Martha's a transgressor by inviting a man into her home. At the beginning of the story Jesus and the disciples are going on their way. But Martha doesn't invite the disciples back to her place; only Jesus. Even in our relaxed and permissive times to invite someone of the opposite sex on first acquaintance back to your pad might seem a bit forward. Just imagine how transgressive it would have been in Martha's day.

But then Mary becomes a transgressor because, by sitting at Jesus' feet, she takes on the role of disciple, a status considered by everyone then and still some people today as restricted to men. The word 'feet' is almost always in the Bible a euphemism for regions not to be talked about. Mary sitting at Jesus' feet at the very least suggests an intense level of proximity and intimacy. Martha's in no doubt that Mary's out of order, but not in crossing gender boundaries: her concern is that Mary's not showing proper hospitality. It's not clear whether Mary lives in Martha's house or not, but either way Martha clearly expects preparing, serving, and clearing a meal for Jesus ought to be a shared project between the two of them.

But then Jesus himself becomes a transgressor, not just by

entering a woman's house, but by criticizing his hostess, a gesture not without precedent: just three chapters before in Luke's gospel he goes to Simon the Pharisee's house and a woman bathed his feet with her tears and kissed them and anointed them and dried them with her hair. Simon derided Jesus for letting the woman do it; but Jesus pointed out that Simon hadn't exactly brought out the red carpet himself. Now Jesus dishes out the same treatment to Martha.

Psychologists use the term triangulation for what Martha's doing. Either Martha isn't making much headway in changing Mary's mind, or she feels the injustice of her situation deserves a wider airing. So, (you know what she does?) she drags Jesus into it. But before we judge this gesture on Martha's part as a display of pettiness, I wonder how many times in the last week you've complained to a third party about a colleague or family member, rolling your eyes and expounding how intolerable it is that you have to put up with such burdensome, unreliable and exhausting people in your life, when deep down you know that nothing's going to change unless you find a way to speak to your antagonist face-to-face.

That tirade is exactly what Martha does. But she goes further. She actually implies Jesus is ungrateful and insensitive; and, not content to stop there, she orders Jesus about, as if he were a teenage child being dragged into a domestic bust-up. She's so angry with Mary she can't bring herself to use her name. 'Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' What started as enjoying Jesus in an act of hospitality has turned into criticizing Jesus, bossing him around, and using him as a casting vote in a sisterly quarrel.

And Jesus is having none of it. He refuses to be dragged in as Martha's cheerleader; and, ignoring Martha's rudeness, he takes her remarks at face value and tells her she's in the wrong. As we've seen, she's so many kinds of wrong. She's made Jesus a pawn in her game, she's overshadowed his visit with the anger of her own sibling dispute, she's told him he's unaware of and unresponsive to injustice, she's implied he has a soft spot for Mary over her, she's ordered him to tell Mary off, she's failed to have the conversation she needs to have with her sister, she's demanded the whole world be more like her. But Jesus doesn't point out any of these wrongs.

Instead, gently repeating Martha's name (in contrast to the way she avoided using her sister's name), he talks about anxiety. Earlier we noticed how in our anxiety we lose sight of the value of what we are and have, and through greed or envy or deferral we scatter our thoughts over many things, thus jeopardizing, diminishing or even losing what we are and have in our fear that we can't rely on it. For fear of the validity of the one, we obscure it with the false security of the many. Now listen to Jesus' words: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.' Anxiety leads to many; truth leads to one.

There's a lot of things about Mary we don't know. We don't know if she lived in Martha's house. We don't know if she'd been part of preparing the meal. We don't know if Martha had any historic reason to be angry with her. We don't know what her Jungian personality type was or where she was on the Enneagram. We only know one thing about her. She sat at Jesus' feet and listened. That was all Jesus really wanted. Martha's bluster, her busyness, her bravado was all a smokescreen, an anxious avoidance: deep down they were saying to Jesus, 'Simply sitting at your feet and listening to you aren't enough. There needs to be more than that.' That's what Martha really gets wrong. She thinks Jesus isn't enough. Mary says nothing but her actions speak loud and clear. They say, 'There's only one thing. And that's Jesus. And that's more than enough.'

And Mary is exalted because she imitates the action of God. In Jesus God's whole attention is focused on us. Jesus isn't fretting and fussing about a thousand things. Jesus is God choosing to be wholly engaged with us. Martha says she's serving Jesus, but her notion of service is entirely on her own terms: she's not giving him what he wants. Mary's service doesn't look much, but it's a statement of faith. Martha offers food; Mary shares communion.

I wonder about what this story's about for you. About what will you say today, 'I have been worried and distracted over many things; there's just one thing I'm really being called to'? I wonder who this story's really about for you. To whom you will say today, 'I've been fretting and fussing over you in a thousand ways; I realize it's time to sit at your feet and listen to you.'

