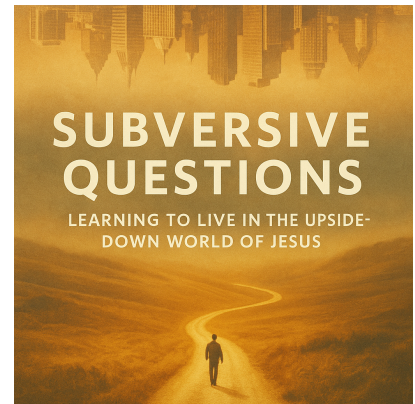


July 20, 2025
Rev. Mike Eller

Subversive Questions: The Upside-Down Way of Jesus

"Are You Distracted from What Really Matters?"

Luke 10:38-42



"Do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? If I had a dollar for every time I heard this at home... What we have here is the classic, "I'm telling Jesus on you!" I am very familiar with this tone. And as a parent, I have to navigate this question like walking through a mine field. In our house, there are expectations for helping out and if one is held to those expectations, the other must follow suit or risk throwing off the whole cosmic balance that is making *all things equal* between twin 11-year-old girls.

I sympathize here with Martha's plight. Jesus is a guest in her home and she has taken on all the work in the kitchen, to make the preparations necessary to welcome her guest... and possibly many more than one. The text says "*They* went on their way." This plurality, we learned from a couple of weeks ago could be any number of that 70 or 72 of those who were sent out in the Gospel of Luke. So, Mary and Martha's home could be the gathering of a much larger group.

I, too, would be frustrated. We've all been there, haven't we? If it isn't with siblings at home, maybe it's at your work place. You're having to pull more than your fair share while others have their cozy, small allotment of work. Martha is doing as she should, exercising an ancient code of hospitality. This is the tradition she reads about in her Bible: In Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah are visited by three strangers who wander into their property. Abraham turns to Sarah to make the preparations so that the guests are welcomed. In that time, there were clear gender roles and the procedure of hospitality was of high priority in the home. Martha, in a similar way, turns to Mary and expects the same response; yet Mary instead finds a far-too-comfortable spot at Jesus' feet.

Martha: working to spin all the plates. Mary: sitting criss-cross apple sauce and listening. “Lord, do you not care...?”

Author Rachel Held Evans points out that it’s a bit unfair that we are seemingly being pitted between these two women as if there is a choice to make here. Last week, we read about the Good Samaritan—who, through quick and continuous action and care, restore a beaten man back to health. Doing the good work saves this man’s life. There was no time for contemplation, only action. Jesus underscores this way of *doing* by centering a Samaritan in the first place—an enemy of his own people—over and against even a priest and Levite of his tribe.

As the reader of these two passages, we seem to be positioned for choosing between the faith of the Samaritan (and Martha) and the faith of Mary—a polarity that continues to haunt the practice and mission of the church. Contemplative Christianity or the Social Gospel of Action? Which one do you choose? Which is the right form of discipleship? One commentator I read this week makes a helpful point: “If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever.” If we asked Jesus, which expression of faith is the better one—the faith of Martha or Mary, he is sure to reply, “yes!”

There is resonance in some early traditions with this. Some scholars believed that Mary and Martha are actually two expressions of the same person, named Mary Magdalene, rather than sisters at odds with one another. Whether or not this is true, we can see that it wouldn’t be hard to make this assumption given how the actions of both are anchored in other places throughout Luke and in the wider ministry of Jesus and his disciples.

There’s a famous legend that went around in the Middle Ages about a Martha of Bethany. The legend goes that following Jesus’ resurrection, Martha becomes a traveling preacher who eventually ends up in a small town in France. In this medieval town, there is an ongoing dragon problem (we would expect no less). Martha is able to slay the dragon and as a result wins over the town to Christianity. I love this image of Martha, the dragon-slayer. In the legend, Mary is also there and ends up in the same town, yet she starts a monastery on the outskirts. By this, both women fulfill the biblical roles they portray in this passage: Martha acts and Mary contemplates.

Author and Spiritual Teacher, Richard Rohr, started the Center for Action and Contemplation in 1987 which is housed in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I’ve

followed their writings and teachings for a number of years. Their mission statement is: “To introduce Christian contemplative wisdom and practices that support transformation and inspire *loving action*.” For them, contemplation necessarily leads to loving action and the inverse is also true. They are dance partners, two sides of the same coin.

Jesus was concerned with both, was he not?—Not only the physical salvation of people (the needs of the poor, the widow, the marginalized, the man left for dead on the side of the road), but also the spiritual, inner liberation of people. I love that the gospel we subscribe to makes room for both action and contemplation. We need to be reminded often of this two-fold rhythm so that we can maintain that balance. There is a time for going and doing, and a time for silence and reflection.

With the patience of a father, Jesus protects Mary against the ridicule of her own sister. “She has chosen the good part” or “good portion”. This is not some sanctioning to retreat into individual spirituality as we are often led to interpret. We read into this a deep attentiveness to the presence and teaching of Jesus... but an attentiveness that was preparatory and not passive. You get the sense that Mary was fueling up to do the good work. She has no intention of merely sitting there forever. We can assume this because in Luke, the way of Jesus is always fleshed out in a great concern and care for others.

Our passage today wraps up a sermon series which has looked at some subversive questions that come out of these stories in Luke—questions which challenge the status quo and societal expectations of that day. We say the Jesus way is an upside-down, subversive kingdom. The question that comes out of this particular story, for me, is: “Are you distracted from what really matters?” You see, Jesus doesn’t criticize Martha’s desire to have her sister’s help with the work. Jesus doesn’t say Martha is not doing the right thing. He only challenges that she is “worried and distracted by many things.” The emphasis here seems to be on attention—Martha’s lack of it and Mary’s single-mindedness. In this, Martha is challenged to focus on the purpose of her work and not center her frustration and discontent, which robs the work of its fulfillment for herself and her guests.

As an aside, I love the agency Martha has here to bluntly ask Jesus, “Don’t you care...?” Between Martha’s boldness in her own home and Mary’s own

boldness to disregard gender roles, these women are challenging the social norms of their day—and Jesus is there for it.

In some ways, we are all Mary. We are just tired from doing the work... of being on the hamster wheel that is living in this increasingly sped up economy of the almighty bottom line where efficiency rules the day... of being in a society that wears over-tired, over-worked schedules like a badge of honor and pushes us to hide our need for rest and relaxation. At least, this is how we must present on social media. We are tired from “keeping our place” in society: keeping up with gender norms, keeping to the acceptable expressions of love and relationship, of holding to the exhaustive social hierarchies. We are tired in the pouring out of ourselves in activism only to come home to the outrageous headlines emblematic of Trump’s America flashing on our screens—another protective law overturned, another fund withdrawn, more guns and less security. We are weary in our fight to make peace, while news of nuclear weapons and continued war between nations endlessly play out daily in front of our eyes. We all are Mary. Sometimes, we need a moment to just sit and be reminded of what actually makes us human. It is in the *being* not the *doing* that calls us back to a centeredness, that leads us back to authenticity, that makes space for wonder.

On another level, we are all Martha. In the exasperation of our busy work as people of faith, we look at the current state of our world: “Lord, do you not care...? Maybe we feel as if we are doing all the work. While others are throwing around prayers and good wishes, we’re trying to feed and house and heal those around us. People don’t need *more* words, they need willing hands and feet. Is this the church crisis we are now facing? Has the church which bears the name of Martha’s Jesus merely become a house of words... merely of rites and creeds and liturgies yet without any real output: formation without commission?

We remember the wisdom of St. Francis of Assisi who said: “Preach the gospel at all times—if necessary, use words.” And in our wordless actions, we busy ourselves but fall into the trap of looking around and comparing our busyness to others. There is also a superiority in that. We too can lose sight of the purpose of our work which empowers the work of our purpose.

Where are you today? Do you empathize with Martha? Do you gravitate toward Mary? The ways into loving action around here can be rather simple: signing up to teach Sunday School, leading a trip to the beach, signing-up to

help unload boxes for the Center for Food Action on August 15th. These are great places to start. Some of us need an image of Mary to remind us, at times, to just *rest and be*: Pick up a new book, take on meditation or some other spiritual practice, renew a commitment to get into nature more often.

Rest is resistance. The world seeks to pull you into its own rhythm and before long, you are just another cog in the machine. To rest is to resist an economy that says you are only worth your output, what you do. The old adage still holds true: We are not human *doings* but human *beings*. This, for me, signals the importance of the rhythm of weekly worship. I believe that in this hour we are sitting at the feet of Jesus to learn, to experience communal silence, of deeper breathing, to be reminded of a truer reality, so that we may be equipped and ready for loving action.

I look around and see that some religious circles have devolved into a mindset of decommissioning parishioners. May this be a house of re-commissioning. Yet, out of what power will we operate in our service to the world without such Mary moments?

Jesus wants to ask us again and endlessly: Are we distracted from what really matters? In our activism, in our contemplation...what could "choosing the better part" look like in our day to day living? This seems to be the real choice. Amen.