

Does Jesus care? That is the question Martha asked in our Gospel reading today. It isn't the only time a follower of Jesus asked him if he cared. In the 4th chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples set out on a boat across a huge lake and while Jesus was sleeping, a storm emerged. High winds, heavy rain and rough waves lashed the boat, filled it with water and overwhelmed the disciples. In their anxiety and despair, they woke Jesus and asked him if he cared that they were perishing. Instead of facing the storm, they turned to Jesus and asked if he cared that all their work didn't protect them from the storm.

Their question in Mark's Gospel is not that different from Martha's question in Luke's Gospel today. We heard Martha was distracted by many tasks and asked Jesus if he cared that she was overwhelmed with work.

When we encounter the question if Jesus cares in the Gospels, it can be difficult to look at the response Jesus gave because it might make us uncomfortable. Perhaps because we already know how we prefer Jesus to respond. After all, it can be easy to relate to the overwhelmed disciples and Martha, as there can be times we all might feel we are in over our heads, with too much to do, or too many storms of life to manage on our own. This can lead to lashing out in anger, and sometimes lashing out at Jesus with a question that is more about us than it about Jesus.

In both instances of the disciples in the boat in the storm and Martha, Jesus does not answer their question by saying he cares very much about their feelings. Instead, Jesus chastised them. Jesus chastised his disciples about their fear and lack of faith that they would somehow get through the storm. We often miss this part, or gloss over it because we tend to prefer the part where Jesus stopped the storm with a wave of his almighty hand. In Martha's case Jesus did not wave his hand to miracle away her distress, so we are given more of an opportunity to notice how Jesus chastised her for much the same reason he chastised the disciples: she was distracted and lost focus.

A lot of people struggle with this short passage in Luke's Gospel. It's easy to look at it as an attempt to pit sister against sister, and to elevate one over the other as Jesus' favorite, in part because we may have been conditioned to look at this passage through the eyes of age-old status quo standards of men maintaining certain roles and value in society and women maintaining certain roles that are of lesser value. This harmful stereotype can be very hard to overcome. Our culture is

full of stories of women fighting each other for positions of leadership or the affections of a man. It is tempting to pick sides because that is what we have been conditioned to do. To root for Martha because she is the living embodiment of our work ethic. She gets things done. She embodies the value of busyness society has come to idolize and mistake for success and status. Or we might root for Mary as a proof text that women can get an education instead of being forced to a life of labor without enlightenment or advancement. We might also ask ourselves why it seems easy to dismiss Mary's embodiment of the cessation of work, to rest, and calmly focus on Jesus with so much work to do, even when Jesus calls this the better part that cannot be taken from her.

It can be difficult to imagine women working together or simply being lifted up in a story about what it means to both love God and our neighbor in real life. Yet there are quite a few scholars who suggest that is what the author of Luke was attempting in this passage.

For the record, Jesus never said he liked one woman better than the other. The better part wasn't a submissive position or keeping quiet. The better part was focusing on Jesus. There was nothing wrong with Martha's work. Martha's problem was that her many tasks were distracting her from focusing on Jesus, who was in her house, who was present with her. This lack of focus on Jesus, his response suggests, is why she was anxious.

When we look at this passage without competition, without picking sides, without shaming the women both of whom were clearly followers of Jesus, or without trying to use them to justify our own agendas, we might glimpse the good news the Gospel has for us.

Like Jesus' disciples and Martha, it can be difficult to recognize the Gospel through the distractions of our many tasks, opinions, worries, fears, sorrows, expectations of ourselves and others, pain of unhealed emotional wounds, guilt, our desires for success, changes we cannot control, or longing for a return to what we imagine used to be, and all the stuff that is our individual and collective lives.

Here is an example of how distractions can impact daily life. There was a behavioral study done on seminarians - people who are in a type of graduate program to earn a master's degree in divinity. It is often assumed the majority of people in such a program are on the path to ordination to the priesthood or diaconate. The study situation was this: the seminarians were intentionally put behind schedule and had to walk from one end of campus to the other to get to

their next class. In that class they were supposed to take an important test. As they hurried to get to their destination, they came across one of their classmates lying on the ground in some sort of distress. In the study, most seminarians passed by their distressed classmate. Their reason was simple: they were distracted by being late and prioritized the test in the next class.

We have to be careful not to judge those anxious seminarians too harshly. Any academic environment can be stressful in more ways than one, as those of you who have been part of Ohio University, or any institution of higher learning, surely can relate to. The point is how easy it is to be distracted and to choose something – like ignoring a person in distress – that under other circumstances we might choose differently.

That's how easy it can be to lose focus, not of what is important, but of what grounds us as who and what we are. As beloved children of God, as those who receive God's love, and strive to love God with our whole being and love our neighbors as ourselves, what grounds us, what serves as our inner compass, what gives us our value and informs how we ascribe value to each other, is not busyness, it is not politics, it is not fame or success, it is not appearance, it is not skin color, race, gender, ability, cleverness, level of education, or life experience. What gives us our direction, our purpose, our reason for the work we do, the reason for the choices we make, is Jesus. This is not the same thing as making Jesus into what we want him to be, like asking Jesus if he cares about our anxieties.

Of course Jesus cares. Just because Jesus doesn't seem to care about our drama doesn't mean he doesn't care. Jesus cares a lot. Jesus cares about loving God and our neighbor in a world full of distractions.

This is a good lesson for us as individuals and as a church. The church as an institution can and is easily distracted by its many tasks. We can easily mistake a parish that has lots of people in the pews and lots of programs and more resources than they can spend in a year as the better ones. But even in a religious looking building where religious looking people are busy with religious type programs they can become so distracted by their building and programs, they miss the moments when Jesus is among them and lose focus. Likewise, other parishes might become so distracted lamenting the losses and changes caused by the pandemic, or the changes in society, that they can miss the presence of the Holy Spirit who is still present and calling to us. We must be careful not to mistake changes in activity or less activity for faithlessness.

In a culture that primarily values and emphasizes productivity, that dehumanizes people by rewarding those it labels “winners” and shames those it labels “losers” and is always trying to push us to pick sides, it takes courage to chose Jesus. Choosing Jesus might even sound counter-intuitive, but this choice can inform our personal and community choices. Like wearing a mask in a pandemic to protect the vulnerable among us from an air born virus so they can participate as freely as possible in public places. Like continuing to find ways to feed people in our community, even those who are not students, as costs soar. Like offering people a place to pray and grieve to help their healing process. To refrain from making that harsh comment on social media because it while it might have made you feel good for a fleeting second it could hurt someone else, driving them further away and more deeply entrenched which doesn't help anyone. To forgive yourself and others. To give yourself time to study and reflect on the scriptures. These are just a few ways we let Jesus, or the Holy Spirit influence our work, our actions, our choices, and how we live our lives both outside and inside the church as beloved children of God.

While such choices require courage, choosing Jesus can also bring hope and joy into our lives and be a source of peace even in troubled times. Such witness not only shows Jesus does care about the world and our relationship with God, it is the good news of the Gospel, the better thing no one, not an enemy, a friend, family, leaders, institutions, illnesses, diseases, the Covid-19 virus and its variants, or anything of heaven or earth can ever take away from us. In Jesus we find the joy and hope that binds us together with God and each other in love and the courage required to keep working for a better day for all people.