Sunday, July 22, 2001
THE ORIGINAL MARTHA STEWART
Luke 10:38-42

I wonder if Martha Stewart's parents knew what they were doing when they named their baby "Martha." I'm talking about the Martha Stewart you see so often in television commercials, the one who now has her own company and is famous for her decorating ideas, cooking, and many suggestions for being the perfect hostess. Did her parents know the story of Mary and Martha in the Bible? In naming her "Martha," did they, in some way, predestine her future? I'm only kidding, of course, but when I read this Bible story this past week in preparation for today's sermon, I immediately thought of the connection between the Martha in the Bible and the Martha Stewart of today.

In doing some further research, I even came across something called the "Martha Stewart Disease." A woman named Donna Lypchuk, who has a wonderful sense of humor, came up with what she calls some early warning signs and definite symptoms that indicate you might be suffering from "Martha Stewart Disease."

Here are a few of her warning signs and possible symptoms: "You have an obsession with hanging swags of brightly colored fabric from curtain rods." "Every shoebox and empty can in the house has been covered with flowers cut out from old wrapping paper."

"You polish every lettuce leaf with a clean white cloth until each one shines like a newly waxed car fender before you put it in the bowl." "Your salads consist mainly of nasturtiums and pansies." "Every chunk of cheese on your cheese tray comes with a toothpick and a little flag clearly labeled with the cheese's country of origin."

Then one of our staff members gave me a list entitled: "Martha Stewart's Way vs. My Way." A few examples: Martha's way: To prevent egg shells from cracking, add a pinch of salt to the water before hard boiling. My way: Who cares if they crack, aren't you going to take the shells off anyway? Martha's way: To determine whether an egg is fresh, immerse it in a pan of cool salted water. If it sinks, it is fresh; if it rises to the surface, throw it away. My way: Eat, cook, or use the egg anyway. If you feel bad later, you'll know it wasn't fresh.

One of the main points of the story about Mary and Martha in Luke's gospel is that, like Martha, you and I can become overly worried and distracted by many things that, upon closer examination, aren't really of ultimate importance. That doesn't mean they have no importance at all. Martha was concerned about many things, but all of them were finite, preliminary, and transitory, while Mary was concerned about one thing, which is infinite, ultimate, and lasting.

Lest you misunderstand, Martha's behavior isn't all bad by any means. On the contrary, her activity is what keeps the world running. It is an important part of what preserves and enriches life and culture. I'm convinced I could prepare a sermon in defense of Martha's way. There are many activities in our lives and in human life generally that demand attention, devotion, and passion. They are important for you and for humanity. But they are not ultimately important. That's why Jesus praised Mary, not Martha. The crucial distinction this story makes is that many of your activities and worries do not deserve the ultimate value you give them.

You've probably noticed, as I have, that you often allow yourself to get all worked up about things that, upon closer examination, aren't really that big of a deal. The old cliché is that you make a mountain out of a molehill.

For example, a stranger might cut in front of you in traffic. Rather than let it go and move on with your day, you convince yourself you are justified in your anger. You might even play out an imaginary confrontation in your mind. Road rage is on the rise. You may have read the story of the man who got so angry at a woman because of some minor traffic incident that he grabbed her dog out of her car and threw it into the street, where another vehicle came along and killed the dog.

Why not have compassion for the person who is in a hurry or is discourteous and remember how painful it is to always be rushing around? This way, you can maintain your own sense of well-being and avoid taking other people's problems personally. Why let other people determine how you're going to act? I'm sure you can think of many instances when you were worried and distracted with many things, and not one of them was of ultimate importance.

That's what Jesus was trying to teach Martha — and all of us — in this little story in Luke's gospel. He was the honored guest in the home of Mary and Martha. Incidentally, it's easy to gloss over the radical setting of the story: Jesus is received into the home of two women, and he teaches women. Rabbis in Jesus' time did not allow women to sit at their feet as students.

According to the story, Mary took time to visit with their guest and engage him in conversation. Martha, on the other hand, was busy with her many tasks and was upset with her sister for not helping. Furthermore, she tried to blame her sister's lack of help on their guest. She said, "Teacher, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." By implication, she was saying, "It's your fault that I have to do all the work. It's your fault that Mary is not helping me."

When things in life do not meet our expectations, it's tempting to operate on the assumption that it must be someone else's fault. An object is missing, so someone must've moved it. The car isn't working, so the mechanic must've repaired it incorrectly. Your expenses exceed your income, so your spouse must be spending too much money. The house is a mess, so you must be the only person doing your part. Mary is not helping me in the kitchen, so it must be that Jesus doesn't understand how much work it is to prepare for a guest, and Mary should know better. My worry and anxiety are all their fault.

This kind of blaming has been with us for a long time, as this little story from the Bible indicates. On a personal level, it can lead you to believe that you are never completely responsible for your own worries, actions, problems, or unhappiness. When you are in the habit of always finding someone else to blame, it keeps you from accepting responsibility for your worries, anxieties, anger, frustration, stress, and unhappiness. It can, as in the case of Martha, keep you from seeing that you are giving some action or behavior ultimate value when it does not deserve it.

Furthermore, in personal terms, you cannot achieve inner peace while blaming others. There are times, of course, when other people or circumstances contribute to your problems. Then it is your opportunity to rise to the occasion and take responsibility for your own well-being.

The important fact to remember is don't blame others too quickly. Things are not always as they seem.

A woman was on a tea break in a small tea room. She decided to read a magazine, have a cup of tea, and eat a snack. She ordered, and the waitress brought a cup of tea and a small package of cookies. She opened her purse and took out a magazine. As she read, a man she did not know sat down at the same table. They did not speak to each other. Suddenly, she was aware that the man had reached into the package of cookies, taken one, and was eating it. She glared at him and took a cookie herself. He glared back.

Coldly, they eyed each other. Defiantly, he reached out and took another cookie. She was furious, her face flushed with anger. She was upset by the impudence of this stranger. He advanced his hand one more time and took another cookie. Coldly, he awaited her response. She was livid. Jaw set, eyes unblinking, she stretched forth her hand and took another cookie. He watched her take and eat the cookie with a fixed stare.

One cookie remained. The man reached for it, picked it up, snapped it neatly in half, and offered half of the last cookie to her. She was outraged and shook her head vigorously in a negative response to his offer. He shrugged, ate the whole cookie himself, and then got up and left the tea room.

The woman's day was ruined. She could not believe the uncouth manners, the blatant greed, the territorial encroachment of some people. With an abiding fury, she opened her purse to put away the magazine and leave the tea room. Her heart skipped a beat. As she put the magazine in her purse, she discovered the package of cookies she had purchased, safely tucked inside. She had put them in her purse when she took out her magazine, and the man had placed the cookies he had purchased on the table while she was reading. She rushed from the room to find the stranger, to apologize and make restitution. But he was out of sight, never to be seen again.

To reiterate, the first point Jesus was making to Martha is that she was worried and distracted by many things that did not deserve that much attention, worry, and distraction. There's a sub-point here that needs to be noted. The main reason that some of the things Martha worried about, and you worry about, do not deserve that much worry and anxiety is because they all come to an end. They are finite. They have no lasting value.

Deep down, you know that. That's why you are so distracted, anxious, and worried about them. In the short span of your life, many of them have already disappeared, and new ones have emerged, which will also disappear. Paul Tillich put it this way: "The melancholy law of transitoriness governs even our most passionate concerns."

Here's the second main point of this little story about Mary and Martha. Jesus said to Martha, "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." He was also saying to Martha by implication, "You have the choice whether or not to be anxious and worried about little things, and if you keep blaming others for your problems, you're never going to choose the better part."

What is this better part that Mary has chosen, which will not be taken away from her? What is the one thing that you need? This is not as easy to answer as you might imagine. It's significant that Jesus in the story did not spell it out in any detail. He knew that if he got too specific, it would be misunderstood. For example, if he had said the one thing you need is religion, this could be misunderstood as meaning a set of beliefs and activities. And Martha, as

other New Testament stories illustrate, was as religious as her sister Mary. Religion can be a human concern on the same level as the others, creating the same anxiety as the others.

Jesus also did not say that the one thing Mary had chosen, which Martha had not, was God. He knew that too could be misunderstood. God can be made a finite concern, an object among other objects. You can make God a person like other persons with whom it is useful to have a relationship, but God is always more than that.

The better part that Mary had chosen was not a “thing” but rather a process. She had chosen to be open to the life of the spirit, to be open to a continuing journey of learning and growing, to be open to living fully in the present, and to be open to finding and fulfilling her full potential as being created in God’s image.

To a large degree, the measure of your peace of mind is determined by how much you are able to live in the present moment. No matter what happened yesterday or last year, or what may or may not happen tomorrow, the present moment is where you are — always. That cannot be taken away from you. You can give it away, as Martha was doing, but it cannot be taken away.

Remember this: Jesus did not say that what Martha was doing to prepare food in a beautiful way was unimportant or that it shouldn’t be done. He did not say that you should not be concerned with many of the practical details of life. He said those things should not be your ultimate or infinite concern. He said she was giving these things more value than they were worth. How did he know this? Because it was causing her to be worried and distracted. It was causing her to be angry with him and with her sister.

In this sermon, I cannot tell you specifically whether or not, like Mary, you have chosen the better part that cannot be taken from you. You will need to examine your own life to determine this. But here is one good test: Are you worried and distracted by many things? If so, you have not yet found what is needed and that which cannot be taken from you. Amen.