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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

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Proper 11, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary Track 2

[Genesis 18:1-10a](#)

[Psalm 15](#)

[Colossians 1:15-28](#)

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

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There's a famous story about time management that the writer Stephen Covey popularized that goes something like this.

"An expert on time management was lecturing to a group of business school students. He pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouthed jar. Then he produced a half-dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them in. When the jar was filled to the top he asked, 'Is this jar full?' The class said, 'Yes.' But then he pulled out a sack of gravel and slowly began dumping it in, shaking the jar so the gravel could work itself down into the spaces between the big rocks. Then he smiled and asked, 'Is the jar full?' Some of the class were starting to catch on. 'Probably not,' one of them called out. And indeed he brought out a bag of sand, started shaking the sand in, and it sifted down into all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked, 'Now is the jar full?' 'No!' the class shouted. 'Excellent!' he said, and finally he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in, until the jar was filled to the brim. Then he looked up at the class and asked, 'What is the point of this illustration?' One eager student raised his hand and said, 'No matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard, you can always fit some more things into it!' 'Nice try,' said the teacher, 'but that's not the point at all. The point is this: If you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all.'"¹

¹ Abridged from a telling by Mark Nevins, "What Are Your Big Rocks?", blog at Forbes.com (January 21, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hillennevins/2020/01/21/what-are-your-big-rocks/?sh=5cbc914afae3>, accessed July 15, 2022.

You may know that story. I like that story. We talked about it this weekend at our vestry retreat as we planned our parish goals for the year. I try to keep it in mind as I manage my time and attention in parish ministry. What are the big rocks; what are the main things; and how do we keep the main things the main things, while still leaving some space and energy for those things that aren't quite as central but are still good and important and life-giving?

One of the criticisms I've heard of that story is that it suggests that it's a good thing in the end to fill your jar up with as much stuff as possible.² When really as human beings we also have a need for some space around the edges, for some margin, to leave room for creativity, for serendipity, and simply for rest. Surely our culture today encourages us to cram our jars full as much as possible.

That may be because we have to. You may be forced to hustle constantly just to feed yourself or your children or to afford food or rent or health care. Or in the case of those with more economic security, the reasons may be more complicated. They may have to do with professional expectations or pressures from loved ones or a sense that we are what we achieve or produce.

In any case it's easy to identify with Martha who is, as Jesus says, "worried and distracted by many things," although the language in the original Greek is stronger. One modern translator puts it "anxious and panicked."³ There is plenty we might find ourselves anxious and panicked about today. Plenty to do to work to make a difference in the world as well as plenty in the world that is out of kilter and that

² E.g., Renée Fishman, "Steven Covey's Big Rocks First Strategy Is Wrong," blog at *My Meadow Report* (November 15, 2017), <https://mymeadowreport.com/reneefishman/2017/big-rocks-first/>, accessed July 15, 2022.

³ Mark Davis, "Martha's Anxiety: Struggling Alone Against Many Things," blog at *Left Behind and Loving It* (July 2013, republished July 14, 2022), <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/07/marthas-anxiety-struggling-alone.html>, accessed July 15, 2022.

we ourselves may have limited influence over but looms over our everyday existence. And then there are the tasks and responsibilities and worries of our own individual lives.

Jesus comes into the village, and Martha gets to work: the work of hospitality. Good work and necessary work. Let's be clear about that. Here in this parish we have a commitment to feeding people who are hungry. We do it every Sunday morning at our Open Table Breakfast. And it doesn't happen by itself. If the dozens of volunteers who keep Sunday Open Table going each week decided to come in here and sit at the feet of Jesus instead of going into Farlander Hall and slicing vegetables, breaking eggs, and dishing up plates, we wouldn't be feeding people. Martha's work is good work and necessary work. And especially so in a world, not just in her place and time but also in ours today, when women do drastically, disproportionate amounts of the work around kitchens and homes, which can be a great source of pride and satisfaction, but is also so easily undervalued, underpaid, and treated as invisible.

Martha's work is not the problem. What may be the problem is what's happening to her heart and spirit as she finds herself overwhelmed by the tasks—tasks that began as an expression of love and hospitality and joy at having Jesus in her home, and yet perhaps have begun to take on a life and importance of their own, so much so that they start to crowd out the whole reason for the tasks in the first place. There's a phenomenon called compassion fatigue where people who are drawn to help others, maybe as therapists or social workers or healthcare workers, find themselves starting to feel resentment and even contempt for the very people they went into the field to care for. It's not because they're bad people. It's because the sheer volume of the work and the exposure to other people's trauma and pain becomes overwhelming. It's a form of burnout. And I wonder if Martha is experiencing a form of burnout as the spirit of love and hospitality in which she

embarked on her ministry of service fades into resentment at her sister, resentment at Jesus, and triangulation as she comes to Jesus to try to get him to make her sister stop sitting at his feet and go suffer the way Martha is suffering.

Mary is engaged in something radical and countercultural herself, a woman sitting in the classic pose of a disciple, a woman engaged in deep learning from the Teacher, a woman treated as the equal and the peer of the male disciples, a foreshadowing of the radical equality that Jesus brings and that will take centuries to unfold in the life of the church and is still unfolding now. And Jesus refuses to tell Mary to stop, to set aside her ministry and take up that of Martha. But nor does he tell Martha to stop and become like Mary. This is not a story about contemplation being better than action, or vice versa. It's a story about keeping the main thing the main thing.

“One thing is necessary,” Jesus tells Martha. And this is one of those places where the Bible text varies. There are some ancient manuscripts that read “Only a few things are necessary,” and others that read “Only a few things are necessary, and indeed only one.” There's an ambiguity about what Jesus is saying. Maybe he's saying that just a simple meal would be fine, that Martha can simplify her many tasks to just a few things. But maybe he's saying instead that although the many things are good, there is only one thing at the center. He himself is the main thing, the only thing truly necessary, the big rock from which all else flows.

At our vestry retreat we talked a lot about priorities. This fall we'll begin a whole-parish conversation about our campus, our physical buildings and grounds, and how we can best use them to serve God's mission in the years and decades to come. We'll be talking and praying about our mission priorities: those particular areas of ministry that we as a congregation are called to focus on, from worship to education to feeding people to other areas of service and outreach. But I learned

something this week about the word “priority.” It’s a word that’s been used in English since the Middle Ages and it comes through French from Latin, from the Latin word “prioritas.” It turns out that until the twentieth century it’s a word that was almost never used in the plural.⁴ You didn’t have *priorities*, because the word itself means “the first thing,” the thing that’s prior, the thing that’s primary.

Jesus is our priority. There may be many things we do or few. The point is what they flow from, and who they flow from. We will be sent out in a few minutes from this table to do the work Jesus has given us to do. And we will come back again next Sunday, as we do always in a rhythm that never ceases, to sit at his feet, to feast with him at his table on the One Thing which is his very self.

⁴ Nevins, “What Are Your Big Rocks?”; see also the graph from Google’s NGrams at https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=priority%2C+priorities&year_start=1500&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=2&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cpriority%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cpriorities%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Cpriority%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cpriorities%3B%2Cc0.