Practice, Practice, Practice!
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Congregational Summer Assembly
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Luke 10:38-42

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him.
39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and listened to what he was saying.
40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked,
"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?
Tell her then to help me."
41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;
42 but few things are needed—indeed, only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

All but four of our family of 14 left yesterday. I was talking with a good friend about all the activity of the past week—the meals I got to prepare, the detailed planning, and having a Mary Poppins cast member in the house! Afterward she asked what I was preaching on today and I said, "I'm using the assigned reading for the week—Mary and Martha." She laughed and said, "Well, it'll be easy for you to poke fun at yourself—you're clearly a Martha!" And it's true. If it's a forced choice question—"Mary or Martha?"—I identify more as Martha.

This story is so familiar I wondered what new wisdom there might be for us this morning. As I prepare a sermon, I always hold the people and contexts around me in my heart and mind. So this week I have been thinking about all of you here at the assembly – the people rehearsing for Mary Poppins, the people getting ready for the art fair, board members and committee members who do so much behind the scenes while also trying to soak in the beauty of this place, and of course there are those of you have flown in or driven in for just a week and will try to get ALL THE THINGS in within 5 or 6 days!

The people in my congregation are always on my mind and heart too. Many in our congregation have worked in federal government most of their lives—pouring heart and soul into public service. Many have lost their jobs. Some lead international aid organizations once funded largely by USAID and have had to lay off thousands of employees. Others are afraid of losing their healthcare.

I am frequently asked, "What is it like to serve a congregation so close to DC during times like these?"

I almost always respond by saying I feel "a clarity of purpose."

When I say I feel "a clarity of purpose," I mean this: the Church was made for times like these. We have been practicing for moments like these.
The Church was made to comfort.
The Church was made to organize.
The Church was made to resist.
The Church was made to hope.

We gather each week not because we've arrived—but to practice. So that when the moment comes to live out our faith, we're ready.

So as I sat with today's text, with all of that on my heart and mind, I found myself wondering: *What does this story say to us in this moment?*
I was searching for something sturdy—something muscular enough to carry us through this time.
And then, somewhere in the back of my mind, a letter appeared. From Jesus. Addressed to us.

Dear Congregational Summer Assembly,

My peace I give to you.
I know that you are living in a challenging moment in history and I see how much you want to figure out your part—even when it's not quite clear what that part is. So, I was pleased to hear from Kathy. She asked if I could write down some reflections about that visit I had with Mary and Martha and whether it might speak to your moment now. I'm glad to do so.

I remember that day well. And I've chuckled, over the years, to see how much people bicker over this story. A story about an argument that has sparked… well… more arguments.

Martha welcomed me with open arms and immediately got to work preparing a feast. There was nothing unusual about that—hospitality was a central virtue in our culture, and she took it seriously. She wanted everything to be just right.

Mary, though, did something unexpected. She stayed at my feet—sitting in the posture of a disciple—listening intently. Women didn't usually take that place, and I didn't ask her to, but she came and stayed.

I understood Martha's frustration—she hadn't expected to do it all alone. But I *was* surprised by her outburst. Rather than quietly asking Mary for help, she turned to me: "Lord, don't you care? Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work? Tell her to help me!"

She was exasperated. There was fatigue and frustration in her voice, and bread dough all over her hands.

I responded gently:
"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. But few things are needed—indeed, only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her."

People can't stop talking about what I meant.

Some say I was praising passive faith. That's not true. All throughout the gospel I lift up women who are persistent, active, justice-seeking—like the widow who wore down a powerful judge with her determination.

Others think I was criticizing "busywork." That's not right either. Kneading bread and roasting lamb is no trivial task. There's no such thing as "just" making dinner. Similarly, the work of setting up risers for worship or building a set for Mary Poppins, which are "behind the scenes" jobs – they all matter.

So what WAS I saying?

I saw how overwhelmed Martha was. Maybe I should have said, "Come. Sit. We'll get dinner together later." What I wanted her to consider was:
"What do you need in this moment?"

Sometimes that need is action. Sometimes it's presence. Often it's **both.**

And that's where I want to speak to you now.

You are not meant to be all contemplation or all service, all faith or all works. The Way is both. And it takes practice.

Have you ever noticed that we call doctors and lawyers "practitioners"? Not because they're unqualified—but because their work requires constant, responsive application in real life.

Faith is like that too.

You don't become compassionate by accident.
You practice it—especially when it's hard.
You don't become hopeful by waiting.
You practice hope when despair is easier.
You don't love only when it's easy.
You love over and over again—especially when it's not.

Faith is not a finished state. It's a practiced way of being.

What people often don't realize is that Luke placed this story directly following the story of the Good Samaritan. In that story a priest and a Levite walk right past the man who had been beaten, robbed, and left half-dead by the road. You would have thought that these

religious leaders would have stopped! One might wonder if these religious leaders only *talked* about faith, but didn't practice it.

The priest, the Levite, and Martha all came to an important moment, and they couldn't meet it properly. You need to practice not only the crafts and the skills needed for your vocation, you need to practice staying in balance so you don't explode when you get frustrated. You need to practice being attentive to what is needed from you in the moment.

So here are a few things to keep practicing.

1. **Practice showing up.**
   Just like the cast of Mary Poppins rehearsed until their lines and steps and harmonies became "practically perfect"—you rehearse love, justice, humility, until they become your natural response.
   Krista Tippett puts it this way: "Hope is a muscle... a choice that actually propels new realities into being. And it's a muscle we can strengthen."
2. **Practice suspending judgment.**
   Nadia Bolz-Weber, when she reflected on the story of Mary and Martha, wrote, "Maybe choosing the better part is not judging the actions of others through the lens of your own personality."
   Your pace, your needs, your spiritual style—those aren't universal. Before reacting, take a breath. Ask what else might be true.
3. **Practice courage.**
   What Mary did that day was bold. She risked criticism and crossed a line. Typically she would have been in the kitchen with Martha – that was what was expected. She broke the norms, she risked being criticized, and she chose to sit with me. Following my Way often means stepping outside of what feels safe or familiar. I hope you continue to risk the way of peace, love, mercy, and justice, and stand with those who are marginalized and oppressed. I hope you will stand with and for those who are being outcast like the trans community, the black community, and the immigrants. You won't always feel ready. That's okay. Courage is something you practice
4. **Practice your part.**
   There are no bit parts in this story. Don't say "I'm only…" or "I can't make a difference."
   You are powerful. You are beloved. You are needed.
   Let your light shine.

So take time this week—whether on the beach, in the woods, or around your family dinner table—to notice what *you* need. Ask, "What is the next right thing?" And whatever it is—be it resting, speaking out, listening more deeply, or stepping up—do it with the knowledge that you are practicing the Way. My Way.

And remember this:
You don't have to do it all.
You don't have to do it perfectly.
You only have to begin.

You are loved.
You are needed.
You are not alone.

My peace goes with you—always.

~ Jesus

Amen.