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Luke 10:38-42
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Wrestling with Unending Needs

We continue to pick on Martha in our story from last week. And know that as a self-professed Martha, I am preaching just as much to myself as I am to all of you. You see, just because I get to stand here and say all these things doesn't mean that I am exempt from any exhortation and correction that comes from the Lord. If anything, you get off easy. You only have to sit with this for about 20 minutes. I have to sit with it for an entire week!

But last week, we saw how Martha wrestled in grief over the loss of her only brother, Lazarus. And I posed that perhaps one of the reasons Jesus didn't heal Lazarus immediately was so that Martha...as a type A get'r done kind of person... would have to experience the utter "out of control-ness" that comes in the wake of death. Those of us who have walked through that valley ourselves know exactly what I'm talking about.

This week, we look at what happens when Marthas or get'r done type of people encounter the unending flow of needs brought on by those serving in ministry because that too can cause us to wrestle with God.

Please join me as we hear from Luke 10:38-42. Its a short text so just bear with me as I read.

"As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. **39** She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. **40** But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, **42** but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination

They say that if you want to get something done, give it to someone who is already busy. Because they will find the time and ability to get it done. But even get'r done type people have limits. We too need time to step away from the

unending needs and take a break. I think that is ultimately what Jesus was getting at with Martha. She needed to take a break.

This week Christianity Today published an article titled “Emptied Out” describing the pastoral burnout and overall pastoral health of those serving in full-time ministry. The black and white cover image shows a clergy person standing in a puddle of what seems to be their pastoral energy which is nearly completely emptied out. Hence the title. But the article describes what so many people in the service industry have experienced over these past several years during COVID. The image could just as easily be a teacher, a healthcare provider, or mental health counselor. Or anyone who daily faces more needs than can possibly be met by their meager efforts.

Author Kyle Rohane writes, “The most widely used measure of burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory developed by Christina Maslach and Susan E. Jackson. It measures three factors: emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and self-perception of professional efficacy...Most people associate burnout with only exhaustion, but according to Rivers, “Individuals are different. Some people can have high emotional exhaustion and really high satisfaction in ministry. They’re tired but not burned out.” So burnout is a greater threat for weary pastors who also have heightened cynicism and low professional efficacy.”¹

If we are were to evaluate Martha in our scripture today with the Maslach Burnout Inventory I would say that she is pretty high on the list and nearing burnout.

Notice first her level of emotional exhaustion. Martha is running around like a chicken with her head cut off, feeling as if the responsibilities for the entire meal fell on her shoulders.

Then notice her cynicism or depersonalization. “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” Well of course Jesus cares, Martha didn’t need to get snarky with Jesus. Besides Mary was sitting right there at Jesus’ feet. Martha didn’t have to passive aggressively confront Mary by triangulating her disappointment through Jesus. Martha could have easily and directly addressed Mary herself. Second sign of burnout.

And finally notice her self-perception that the meal preparations were all up to her. But in reality there were at least 15 sets helping hands in the room. Mary’s, Lazarus’, Jesus’ and his twelve followers’. Martha was not left without options. She could have stopped the preparations and left the meal undone until Jesus was finished talking. She could have stated her expectations in advance to others and asked for help. Instead, Martha chose to become grumpy which ruined her moment with Jesus.

¹ Kyle Rohane, in “Emptied Out, Tens of Thousands of Pastors Want to Quit But Haven’t What has that done to them?” published in *Christianity Today Magazine* May/June 2022 edition, pg 50.

You see Martha was emptied out. She had nothing left to give. And when we are emptied out, we don't typically think things through as rationally as we ought. We become cynical or sarcastic. We depersonalize the people we are to serve as if it is their fault that we have so much to do. And we can even begin to question our calling or ability to do what we are being asked to do.

Is this sermon timely or what just before our Women's Tea next weekend. I am reminded just how much work needs to be done to make sure our great Cascades women feel loved and appreciated. I certainly couldn't do it all by myself. So I made sure to have a written plan in place and delegated as much as possible so that I could serve from a full cup and not an empty one.

This begs the question, so how can we build a better resilience as we serve others? I think it comes down to three important things: First, understanding who we are and how we are wired. Second understanding who God is and how God is wired. And third we put some spiritual practices in place that will ensure that our cup is constantly being refilled as we pour ourselves out onto others.

First we need to understand who we are and how we are wired. I have mentioned before that I am a two on the Enneagram. The Enneagram is a personality assessment much like the Myers Briggs test. A two on the Enneagram is a helper. So I am wired to serve other people. When I am meeting the needs of someone else, my heart begins to sing as God has created me.

While twos serving in ministry might seem like a sweet spot, it can also be a tremendous curse. Because in ministry there are endless amounts of needs. No matter how much I pour myself out, there is always more that can and should be done. Things will naturally fall through the cracks.

Now a two who is also a Martha in ministry can be a kiss of death. Because we Marthas are get'r done type people. But the work of the ministry is never done. It is always unfinished. It is always unraveling. It is always a work in progress. We never are finished with our work.

I had to come to terms with this very early on in my pastoral days here at Cascades. For me the end of the work week is Thursday. By Thursday evening with the exception of emergencies, I put down my sermon writing, I stop all my pastoral calls, and I wrap up the administrative work of the church. I have to stop and rest and let all of the unfinished tasks remain in God's hands.

Come Friday, I enter into my sabbath rest. Where I rest because God put down his work and rested on the seventh day of creation. So please hear this, unless you are experiencing a pastoral emergency, please help me rest by not calling me or expecting me to respond to your emails on Friday. Again unless it is a pastoral emergency, it will have to wait until Saturday or even Monday morning.

Which leads to my second point as we wrestle with unending needs. We need to understand who God is and how God is wired.

I think we can all agree that God is God, and we are not. God can handle what's going on in the lives of billions of people on the planet at one time. We humans cannot. And as I mentioned before even God set down the work of creation to rest, not because God was limited in capacity like humans are, but to set the example and the rhythm so that we humans might follow suit.

The Apostle Paul told the Colossians what God is like. He said, that “[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all of creation...that God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.”²

He also wrote to the Philippians about Jesus' limitations as a human. “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.”³

Jesus, being fully God and fully human, emptied himself out of his ability to handle everything that is going on in the world and became a servant. But how did he manage this without being a victim of burnout?

The Gospels show us how Jesus' time of solitude and silence were a key theme that ran throughout his ministry. So this is one way how Jesus took care of himself as he ministered to the unending needs of the world around him.⁴

Jesus took time off following major victory such as feeding thousands with very limited resources.⁵

Jesus took time off before making major decisions like choosing his disciples.⁶

Jesus took time off following a period of heavy ministry such as attending to the needs of the crowds that followed him everywhere.⁷

Jesus took time off when he had had enough of people, after hitting his peopling limits.⁸

² Colossians 1:15-19

³ Philippians 2:4-7

⁴ <https://justbetweenus.org/everyday-life/living-healthy/jesus-took-time-off-too/> by By Pete Briscoe and Patricia Hickman

⁵ Matthew 14:22-23

⁶ Luke 6:12-13

⁷ Mark 6:30-32

⁸ Mark 7:24

Jesus took time off when faced difficult or intimidating tasks such as on the night he was betrayed when he went off to pray by himself on the Mount of Olives.⁹

Church do we hear that constant thread? Jesus took time off! And if Jesus took time off from wrestling with the unending needs of his ministry, then so should we.

So the question that remains is: “How can we build better resilience as we serve others?”

First we must take care of ourselves as we care for others.

The Apostle Paul just before encouraging the Philippians to take on the nature of a servant as Jesus did said, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of others.”

Did we hear that? God expects us to look after other peoples needs AS we are looking after our own.

An oft-cited 1999 study found that caregivers of Alzheimers patients have a 63 percent higher mortality rate than non-caregivers, and according to Stanford University, 40 percent of Alzheimer's caregivers die from stress-related disorders before the patient dies.

If we are serving as caregivers, we MUST take care of ourselves if we are going to take care of others.

Second, we must put aside the unending needs and let some of that work remain undone. We can do this observing the sabbath and resting because one day a week God set aside his work and left creation undone. If Sabbath was good for God, then it’s certain good for us to practice as well.

Last summer I was grateful for the gift of my sabbatical. Putting down the work of ministry was not hard for me. What was difficult was how much my summer was spent wrestling with grief. Grieving the loss of people I loved. Grieving that my sabbatical wouldn’t work out as planned. Grieving the inability to minister to people in ways that I had found meaningful for the past fifteen years. Grieving the toxic political culture in our nation and seeing how it had bled into the Church during COVID.

But as with one pastor in the Christianity Today article replied, “It was in that quiet and waiting that restoration began to happen, where I wasn’t responsible for people, and the grief began to slip away.”¹⁰

I needed, and still need, that time and space to heal from these losses.

⁹ Luke 22:41

¹⁰ Rohane, “Emptied Out” in *Christianity Today*, pg 53.

And third, we need to acknowledge that as we serve others, we simply cannot make everyone happy. Again as a two on the Enneagram this is really hard to deal with. Because twos are people pleasers. So I just have to trust that God will help heal the wounds that are caused when I can't meet certain expectations or needs.

I don't think it is by chance that this topic comes up on a day when we celebrate our mothers who know what burning the candle at both ends looks like. Mothers sacrifice, they give themselves away to us. But Moms you can't take care of other well unless you also take care of yourselves.

How is God speaking to us today?

What tasks are God inviting us to leave undone today?

Could we trust that God would take care of those needs and give us true rest?

I want to close with a poem that I found in a booklet. It's called Less is More, a blessing for those who are weary of constantly serving others.

Less is More¹¹

"May your less be more today.

Less planning, more praying
Less going, more staying
Less busy, more simply
Less hurry, more slowly.

Less instruction, more connection
Less production, more imperfection
Less influence, more substance
Less performance, more presence.

Less leading, more guiding
Less building, more abiding
Less proving, more receiving
Less striving, more ceasing

Less guilty, more grateful
Less judgy, more gentle
Less flury, more restful
Less worry, more joyful.

More to be, less to do

¹¹ Sarah Bourns, "Less is More" in *Pandemic Prayer and Poetry* (Sarah Bourns, 2021), 37

Less of me, more of You.”

So may we let go of unending needs that surround us and sit at Jesus’ feet and hear him say to us one more time...

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”¹²

Maybe Mary did get it right after all. Amen.

¹² Matthew 11:28-30