

I think Martha was perhaps only seeing the worst of things and therefore could only focus on all the ministry and work that needed doing. Her view wasn't wrong, but it was incomplete. Zinn calls us just as Jesus does: to see places where people are behaving magnificently; to see places where God is showing up in awe-inspiring ways. And then to live and act on that fuller view. Living in defiance of all that is bad around us does not require faith in Christ. But faith in Christ surely helps us to see the world the way Jesus does and to respond accordingly—as a world filled with hope, compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness.

I cannot talk about *worldviews* this week without thinking about those incredible images from the James Webb Space Telescope that were just released.¹ If you haven't seen them yet, I urge you to go in search of them. The images use near-infrared light to capture the birth of stars, multiple faraway galaxies, and they even show the chemical fingerprint of water on a planet outside our solar system. They look like mythical paintings and they take your breath away when you realize one image is showing multiple galaxies at once. Pictures like that help me shake off my Martha brain to become a little bit more like Mary. They help me gaze in wonder at the vastness of the universe that lies out there; those images change my perspective and take me outside myself and the problems here that weigh so heavy. I can barely grasp what the science tells us about these images, and yet I know they are worth my attention and the awe it inspires. Similarly, sometimes, I can barely grasp the awe and splendor of the loving, merciful God who sent Jesus among us. Yet, I know that God is worth me sitting quietly at Jesus' feet, giving him my undivided attention. God is worth me setting aside the world's problems for a moment, even the heavy ones, to pay attention to God's very presence; to focus on Jesus' challenging teachings, and to give my attention to the people all around me, who are the clearest way I encounter Jesus here on earth. Surely those faraway, brain-bending, galaxy-filled satellite images help us glimpse something of what Jesus' worldview is like.

There is much ministry to do here on earth; many needs to be met; there always will be. You and I know that all too well. But Jesus asks that we not pull ourselves apart trying to solve it all ourselves, right this minute. Jesus asks that sometimes, we set our service aside. And join Mary, listening and looking at Jesus alongside her. Perhaps laying on our backs, gazing up at the stars, in awe of the vastness of the universe. As together, we seek to see God's world, God's way.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

July 17, 2022
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
“Jesus’ Worldview”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Luke 10:38-42

Whether you relate to Martha or Mary or neither one; whether what you hear in this passage give you permission to take a break from work or makes you feel like Jesus is admonishing you, I hope we can all uncover some new meanings of the story together today. We enter into Martha's home with Jesus. Perhaps Mary lived there, too. But Luke says the home belonged to Martha. When Jesus came in, Mary sat herself down on the rug and started listening to this teacher who was gracing the people in the living room with his shared wisdom. Martha did not come and sit. The translation we read says that Martha was distracted by her many tasks. Most times, we assume that meant serving food or cleaning. But we have to look more closely at two words in that sentence. First, the word used for *task* in the Greek is *diakonian*—where we get our word *deacon*. When men do *diakonian* in scripture, it's always translated *ministry or service*. So, it probably really means that here, too. As one of my colleagues wrote this week, “NOWHERE in this scripture does it say Martha was in the kitchen making dinner.” More likely, Martha was busy with some kind of community care ministry. Maybe something like Tabitha, who we read about back in May, who took care of poor widows.

Now for that bit about Martha's ministry distracting her. Clearly she was upset by all that she was doing. She was being drawn away from something. But when Jesus said that Martha was distracted, his words were different and much more forceful. He meant that her worry was tearing her to pieces, pulling her apart. Martha was seriously in a bad way—spiritually, emotionally. Whatever was happening with her, which may or may not have been her own fault, was doing her real harm.

When I listen more closely, I can hear that pain in Martha's voice. She was almost pleading with Jesus. “Don't yet see; don't you care. I am suffering here, all alone. There is so much ministry to do. No one is helping me. Not even my sister.” Her urgency led to a demand. “Jesus, tell Mary to help me.” Martha wanted Jesus to see the world the way she saw it; the way she was

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2022/07/12/1111002820/webb-telescope-images-nasa>

experiencing it. Martha saw before her all the ministry that needed doing; all the pain in her community; all the people suffering. And she knew there was no time to waste. People need food and housing now. The sick need medicine and gentle healing right away. Unjust laws need to be turned over sooner, not later. So Martha was saying, "Let's get to work. I can't do it all by myself. Make everyone else help. The world is hurting right now."

But Jesus refused to see the world the way Martha did. He did not ignore the needs. It's just that Jesus refused to see *only* the needs. Jesus also wanted to see the beauty, the abundance, the wonder of what God was already doing out there among all those needs. Jesus did not want to sacrifice time with God's Spirit, even for the worthy cause of helping others. That's what he praised Mary for. Mary was interested in seeing things from Jesus' worldview when she sat down at Jesus' feet. She wanted to train her eyes not just to see the pain and sorrow and the needs waiting to be met. She also wanted to see what Jesus saw; to notice the grace already present; to find ways to offer that grace to others and even to offer it to herself, too.

On the surface of things, our world is a mess. You don't need me to tell you that. Martha is seemingly right. There is so much to do, so much to fix, so much healing and peacemaking to be done. We'd better get to work and maybe Jesus ought to command everyone to help out. How does Jesus see the world? While I am sure Jesus weeps for the brokenness of our world, that is certainly not all he does. He also sees goodness in the midst of the bad, and magnifies the good. He sees kindness and compassion, as our kids are learning about this summer, and helps those actions bloom. Jesus takes seriously all the terribly serious, heart-wrenching things we see and endure. But he is also serious in urging us to take ourselves lightly, to take the long-view of things, and to join him in taking in the wonder of this grace-filled world. This is, indeed, the better part. Whereas Martha is tearing herself apart trying to serve, Mary has chosen the better part, the better way: listening to Jesus, learning from him, learning to see the world his way.

A couple of our refugee team volunteers have been trying to see things from Jesus' worldview. The Motakhasiv family is the Afghan family resettling here after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan last year. The leadership team working with them is often mired in countless issues and problems as we work with Samaritas and try to sort everything out. From tax returns to driving lessons to bank accounts and doctor visits, things are just tricky with a large family, limited communication, and an overburdened agency. That is true. And the work is so needed. But it is not the only way to view things. Earlier this summer, the Motakhasiv family invited our members, Ted and Anne-Marie DeVantier over to their home

for dinner. Ted and Anne-Marie had a million other things happening, and already had another dinner scheduled for the same night. But they know the importance of hospitality in the Afghan culture, and also the importance of the reciprocity of our relationship with the family. So they accepted the invitation. They also had heard, or thought they had understood, the meal was going to be a birthday party for Tahmena, the youngest daughter, who was to be turning two. Ahead of the big day, Anne-Marie and Ted generously bought presents for the little birthday girl, they got balloons and a card. They went to their other dinner engagement first, and then drove down to Detroit to the Motakhasiv home for the meal there. Keep in mind, the DeVantiers, like all of us, don't speak Dari or Pashto and the family doesn't speak English. When they arrived, there were plates of food, giant cups of milky, spiced Afghan tea, bread, dried fruit, nuts. They ate together and it was a party indeed! After the meal, Anne-Marie and Ted made a big show of pulling out the gifts for Tahmena and celebrating with her. Her older brothers and sisters helped her unwrap them and everyone loved playing with the balloons. The kids enjoyed the toys and helping their sister. And Abdul Basir and Bibi Hawa, dad and mom, were very grateful. Only, it turned out that it was not Tahmena's birthday at all. Through halting communication, they were stunned to find out it was actually her mom, Bibi Hawa's birthday.

And in the end, they all laughed about the whole thing! Ted and Anne-Marie had been so sure about everything, yet they were not embarrassed. They and the family realized how funny it all was and what a wonderful, happy time they had, regardless. Because they were together, creating relationships and friendship. They were breaking bread and eating together; giving and receiving hospitality. They were, sometimes literally, sitting at each other's feet to learn and grow in love. On that night, everyone refused to be torn apart and undone by all the hard things unraveling around us. Everyone forgot about the appointments, and the car seats, and the translation issues, and the bureaucracy. Together, they chose the better part.

Howard Zinn is a historian and political scientist. He wrote, "To be hopeful in bad times is based on the fact that human history is not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand Utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."