

This summer, Katie and I have been watching season three of “The Handmaid’s Tale.” We missed it last week because we were off the grid, but we are devoted fans.

The television series is based on Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel and it tells of a dystopian future following a second American Civil war. The new government claims to be Christian and believes that divine law, including all of the laws in the Old Testament should be strictly observed by modern society. No more bacon. No more shrimp, unless you’re sneaking around. The leaders of the government are power-hungry and fanatical. And among their cruelest actions are the laws which prevent women from owning property, handling money or reading. All of the signs are in picture-grams because women are no longer allowed to read.

Because of disease and damage to the environment, fertility rates have dropped dramatically and so women who are fertile are required to serve as handmaids who bear children for the leaders of their society.

The rest of the women are divided into a small range of categories. The Wives are married to men with elite positions in the government. They are expected to manage their households and entertain guests beautifully. Everything is to be smooth and lovely. They become the mothers of the children born by the Handmaids.

The Aunts train and supervise the Handmaids. The Econowives are lower class women who work in menial positions deemed suitable for women. These jobs require no education and little training. Prisoners are called Unwomen. They are not even women and sex workers are named Jezebels. And then, there are the Marthas. They wear plain functional dresses and kerchiefs over their hair. They have aprons. They do the cooking, the baking, the cleaning, the laundry. They change the diapers and make sure the children get to school on time and do their homework. They are the engine that runs each household. And they are named for the Martha in our gospel today.

And yet, in that society, there is no Mary.

There is no category for those who might study the Bible or engage in regular worship. In fact, worship doesn’t even seem to be a part of their society. And so while Jesus said that Mary had chosen the best thing to do- she is not a part of their society.

When one of the wives suggests that their daughters be taught to read so that they can read the Bible, so that they can understand the scriptures, she is a scandal. At a meeting of the commanders of her city, a group of men who are in charge, she has the audacity to take a Bible, which was strictly forbidden, she follows up her request by reading aloud from a Bible. After they take her away, she is punished by having her finger amputated. That’s what happens to women who are caught reading. There is no forgiveness, no gospel, no joyful adoration of the Lord. There’s only hard work and servitude.

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What would our lives be like if there was no space for us to be like Mary? If there was no opportunity to come and hear the good news spoken and preached?

What if there were no joyous hymns of praise? What if there was no laughter in church? No friendly greetings of “Peace be with you!” What if we never got to dive deep into the Bible and come to know the love of Jesus?

What if we never had the opportunity to live like Mary?

What if we never got the chance to choose the better part. We never knew there was a better part to choose! Think of all we would miss if we were only allowed to follow Martha’s path and never Mary’s?

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On the other hand, there are many who would hear today’s gospel and be quick to rid themselves of Martha. Who wants to be like Martha? Stuck in the kitchen, slaving over a hot stove, worrying about silly things that just aren’t that important when Jesus is sitting in the other room. He is right there in her living room but she is too busy in the kitchen. But in case we get overly critical of Martha, we do well to remember what Jesus did earlier in this same chapter of Luke. He sent out 70 disciples and told them to expect and to accept hospitality from others. And isn’t Martha just the kind of host that they were hoping that they would find? One that would provide them with a meal lovingly cooked. One who would have a clean house and a nice bed for them to sleep in.

And later, when the twelve start arguing about which one of them is the best, which one of them does Jesus like the most, which one is the greatest, Jesus will tell them that what makes a person great is when they are dedicated to serving other people. He says, "Foreign kings order their people around, and powerful rulers call themselves everyone's friends. But don't be like them.

"The most important one of you should be like the least important, and your leader should be like a servant.

"Who do people think is the greatest, he says, a person who is served or one who serves? Isn't it the one who is served? But I have been with you as a servant."

So clearly, there is nothing wrong with what Martha has been doing. Her servanthood is a model of discipleship for us. Lutheran Professor Brian Peterson writes, "If we are overly critical of Martha, we may end up with an image of faith that never actually does anything for anyone else. As many commentaries mention, the... story of the Good Samaritan [comes right before this story –and the two texts work together and]... need to be understood together. The Samaritan embodies love for the neighbor; Mary embodies love for God. Both the Samaritan and Mary," he says "are socially disqualified from being models of anything good according to the norms of their culture, [from the outside what both of them are doing seems unimportant] and yet they are both images of the kingdom which Jesus brings. Both are needed to complete the discipleship Jesus calls for: to hear God's word and to do it. We need the "go and do likewise" [which comes at the end of the good Samaritan story] AND we need to remember that sitting as a disciple to hear the word of Jesus is a gift not to be neglected or taken away."

We don't have to choose between Mary and Martha. And we probably shouldn't try.

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This last week I was in Clay, West Virginia. It is a very small town. It feels like a slightly larger Bedminster, except there isn't a Perkasio or Quakertown nearby. It is an hour drive to the closest "good" hardware store. There were thirteen of us all together. We were divided into two work crews which were named for finishes on clay pottery- Frosted Turquoise and Purple Blaze. I was with the turquoise group and we had two primary tasks: recover a part a part of the roof on the homeowner's house. It was a double-wide trailer that she and her dad had made some additions to and where the trailer and the additions met, water would just come pouring in. So our job was to cover that and make sure that there were no more leaks when it rained. We were also to finish the rehab work on one of the bathrooms. The roof was completed by mid-day Thursday but the bathroom which seemed so straightforward on Monday, was tricky.

Basically our team needed to fit a 60 inch bathtub into a 57 inch wide space. Trailers usually have smaller bathtubs and the smallest regular bathtub is 60 inches. Matt Gruver and Marshall Fowler worked diligently for a day and a half to make all the pieces fit. It took twelve long, difficult hours to create that extra three inches so that the tub would slide in and fit into its space.

I'm glad to say that they got it done at 5:00 on Friday afternoon which was very exciting for all of us. And there are photographs of the two teenage boys who use that bathroom sitting in the bathtub as soon as it got in. And their faces are just so happy. It was a tremendous moment.

Unfortunately, since that part of the project was so complicated, some of the other work in the bathroom couldn't get done. While Matt and Marshall worked so hard, Susannah, Maya, Delaney, Katie Fritchman and I waited to finish the drywall process. But we never got to it. Another team arrives in Clay this afternoon, and I am certain they can get the work done, but Friday was tough for our entire team. The guys were frustrated trying to find that three inches and it was 100 degrees outside and the women were all trying to figure out what to do with ourselves.

It was such an odd day of wanting to be like Martha. That's why we were there – to serve through practical tasks. We had on our grubby clothes. We had our tools. We knew what we needed to do. We were willing to get hot and grimy and stinky so that Windy and her family could have two working bathrooms. But all we could do was wait.

And yet, I am convinced that our time was not wasted.

One of the boys spent quite a bit of time talking to our kids. And I can't blame him. A seventeen year old boy and a group of beautiful young women- so there was a lot of talking that went on. They listened to music. They exchanged stories. They debated about which songs were better and showed off their dance moves in the driveway.

They shared a tub of homemade cookies. And talked about school and what the future might bring for them- what they might like to do with their lives. Most important of all – our kids listened. And this

was a boy who need listeners. He was hungry for friends and they could see it. Rather than being uncomfortable with his awkwardness and his eagerness to talk to them all, the girls just kept listening.

It was never said aloud, but our kids were sharing the gospel simply by being present. Their kindness, their compassion and their humor was a gift that they willingly offered. They were sharing the peace of Christ.

As for me, I got to do my own listening to a woman who was as in need of another pair of ears as her younger brothers. In the last ten years, Windy has been holding her family together by parenting her six adopted brothers and sisters. Her parents were foster parents and there was a family of six kids who needed to be placed. Her mother said, "Don't separate them. Bring them to my house." And so they took on this group of kids when they were in their sixties. Now they are in their seventies and taking care of this group of kids isn't as easy. And so Windy has parented these young people, one at a time and sometimes two at a time. They have come to live in her house. She is their legal guardian and she is watching out for them.

She is an incredible woman. I feel blessed to have been trusted enough to listen to her story. And it was good to be able to tell her that she is a gift of God to those children. That what she is doing is remarkable and many people would refuse to do it. And I told her that I would be praying for her as their family faces some new challenges in the months ahead.

While Matt and Marshall were being Martha – I got to be Mary. And both tasks were equally important. Of course, in our text today, Jesus tells Martha that Mary's actions are better, but perhaps the problem isn't so much what Martha was doing but the way that she did it. Maybe the problem lies in her motivation and her agitation that her sister wasn't helping her in the kitchen. It's a temptation that we always face – thinking that our way of responding to God's love is the best way. *This is the way it needs to be done!* And so we get angry when they don't follow our lead. *Can't you see that this is what we need to be doing?*

When we do that, we are belittling the calling that God has given to that other person. And we make assumptions about how the Holy Spirit is operating because of course, *God would do it the that I would do it. That's the best way to do it, isn't it?* And yet, our kids were dancing in the driveway, to silly country and western music and they were speaking the word of God just by being there. It isn't the way I would have done it, but it was certainly a blessed way.

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Here's one last interesting thing about our gospel today. Although Martha might seem to be doing the traditional women's work, she is really quite amazing. She is really quite unorthodox. Luke says that it is into her house, Martha's house, that Jesus is welcomed. This was rather unheard of in that time and place.

This is the only story in which Martha or Mary appear in Luke, and there is nothing about their brother Lazarus, who shows up in the gospel of John. Luke says, this is Martha's house. There is no father, husband, brother, son. There is no man in charge of the hospitality or of making the decisions. This is Martha's to choose. Martha's to share. So perhaps all she could see was that she needed to provide for Jesus. She was opening her home to these people and so she was all caught up in what she could do for Jesus without seeing that it is Jesus who is there to provide the one thing that she really needed. He is present and everything else that was going on that day was just gravy. Everything else that might be said or done is just extra. What was important was that Jesus was giving of himself.

It can be difficult to give up the role of provider so that we can receive a gift from someone else. We love to be in control. It's part of being human. It's hard to be vulnerable. It's hard to receive because what I really want to do is give what I've got. But to stop what you're doing, to listen to someone else or take the time to play or sing or dance in the driveway - that can be so much more important. And those memories can never be taken away.

The things that I will remember most about that week and about Appalachia have everything to do with singing the word of God, with hearing it sung, with hearing it spoken, with hearing our kids talk about how they were connecting what they were doing with the faith that they have in their hearts.

Petersen says, "Jesus comes to turn us from important but secondary things, and as the gracious and loving host to turn us to himself. There is no question here of *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* The *better part*, which will not be taken from us, comes as a gift." All we need to do is receive it.

Jesus offers himself and when we take on the role of Mary, all we do is accept the gift. We are called as disciples of God to do both things- to love our neighbors through actions and to love our

God through our dedication and our openness to what God says to us and then to share it with other people. The one is more important- loving God before loving others- but I don't know how you separate them. They are forever joined. And so we celebrate today the gift of Martha's service and the gift of Mary's dedication. May you be blessed with both gifts.