

“The Center”  
 July 17, 2016  
 Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
 Luke 10:38-42

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

### Introduction

Lord have mercy. With another tragic week the summer of violence and heartache continues, and a season of healing—by necessity—grows longer. We live in a time when refocusing on the reality of Jesus Christ as the center of our lives becomes essential. Now, more than ever we need to take a deep breath and center ourselves. Breathe. God is always inviting and re-inviting us to make Jesus our center, and then to move toward that center. Today’s helpful story from the Gospel of Luke illustrates what it looks like when we focus our attention on Jesus, keep our eyes on him, and listen to what he says. The world may be swarming with a steady flow of troubling events, but we have a place where we can go; a place where we can heal, a place we call home. A place who is a person who we call Savior.

### The Age-Old Story

Mary and Martha. Many of you have heard this story before. Quite likely you have heard it many times before. It’s an age-old story. This is a story about two sisters; two very different sisters.

*Now as Jesus and the disciples are going on their way, he enters a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomes him into her home. She has a sister named Mary, who sits at the Lord’s feet and listens to what he is saying.*

*But Martha is distracted by her many tasks;*

One who sits at the feet of Jesus and listens; one whose attention is drawn by the many things that need doing. One who is still; one who cannot stop moving. One who waits for what Jesus will say next, one who has something to say to Jesus:

*So Martha comes to Jesus and asks, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”*

Two very different sisters. Two very different approaches to Jesus. But before we draw any conclusions, before we decide in our minds who is a Mary and who is Martha, before we take up a defense for either one, realize that we are them—both of them. We all have our Mary moments, and we all have our Martha moments. They are two sides of a reality that make up a human being. But God, I believe, is using the sharp contrast in this story to intentionally recalibrate the center of our lives.

### Driven to Distraction

Mary just sits there and listens. But *Martha, Martha*. So many tasks. So many worries. Like us: too many to-do lists and assignments, calendars filled with appointments and meetings, shopping, household chores, family gatherings and meals, getting children here and there, work, school, homework, finding a job, keeping a job, civic responsibilities, and lest we forget, ministry in the local church. These are the things that keep us on the wheel and in the loop. They are what drive us to distraction.

Luke identifies distraction of tasks as Martha’s issue. Her problem is that which steals her focus. I am sure you know what steals your focus in the course of a day.

All our tasks, and all our concerns, our worries, our fears. Beside the endless string of things that need doing are the daily reports from a troubled world. Terror, violence, political division, racial enmity, oppression, poverty and hopelessness. We get to thinking, is God paying attention? Does Jesus even care?

Meanwhile, back in the story, with all that is happening, Martha feels the same and wants to know. How can Mary—and Jesus—just sit there?!

*“Tell her to help me!”*

*“Martha, Martha, Jesus says, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.”*

There is a place. A place where distractions fall away. When the torrent of life threatens to take us down, there is a center God is calling us into.

What is Real?

And yet, there are two sides. We have a true self. And we have a false self. Our false self is forever constructing surrounding worlds that reinforce the illusion. Thomas Merton, a twentieth century Catholic mystic and monk wrote:

*“Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self.*

This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown by God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the radius of God’s will and God’s love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion...

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered.” This is the reality in which the Martha mind exists; where most of our minds exist.

But there is a reality that supersedes this and all other realities. The unmistakable reality of Jesus Christ.

We heard Bill read from Colossians earlier:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. (Also see John 1)*

Do you see? All of life flows through Christ. Are you catching this vision?

Worries, and worries upon worries. We would say we have reason to be worried. Look around and see all that is happening. We may think all this is reality, and yet we hear there is need of only one thing.

Our life is made up of many circles. the circle of our family, the circle of our friends, the circle of our community. God is inviting us to place that one thing, the reality of Jesus Christ at the center of our lives, at the center of our families, at the center of our relationships, at the center of our communities. This is where we must fix our gaze. In a world that is filled with illusions, this is what is real.

The Good News

All is temporary. We want to believe there is some permanence, but the opposite is true. No matter how much we accumulate, no matter what we know, or how many

people we meet, and no matter how much we accomplish, everything in life can and will be taken from us. When the time comes to exit this life, we all go out the same way. Empty-handed.

But hear the good news: there is one thing that remains and,

*“Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”* I hope you hear that as clear as I do. That is a promise from Jesus.

Mary has found the center of life, that which holds all together, that which cannot be taken.

So reflect today: What is in *your* heart? What is in *your* mind? What do *you* see? What do *you* hear?

In light of all that is circling around our lives in our world today know there is healing in the quiet center. There is peace in the quiet center. There is hope in the quiet center. Know that Jesus is the quiet center.

#### Sent Out in Mission

As you go out today know this is the time to get centered. This is the time to refocus our vision on what matters. As you continue on your spiritual journey this week keep in mind how we are all connected as if in a large circle, and that Jesus is at the center. As you go out to do the work of your ministries and missions do not be consumed by distractions, but remember there is only one thing that matters. We invite Jesus into our ministries and then we must be focused and always listening to him. Jesus must be placed and remain at the center, or there is no ministry worth doing.

The invitation for all is to imagine life with Jesus as the defining factor in all things. God is recalibrating our lives so the author of life once more stands at the center. Remember the Celtic Cross. Long ago St Patrick delivered the Good News to Ireland and saw the entirety of life understood through the reality of Jesus Christ. The ancient symbol of the circle now made sense with the cross centered within it. This is the cross we have atop our steeple here in Island Heights. And now something to meditate on: let St. Patrick’s prayer remind you of a life which positions us best before the Lord:

Christ with me,  
 Christ before me,  
 Christ behind me,  
 Christ in me,  
 Christ beneath me,  
 Christ above me,  
 Christ on my right,  
 Christ on my left,  
 Christ when I lie down,  
 Christ when I sit down,  
 Christ when I arise,  
 Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
 Christ in every eye that sees me,  
 Christ in every ear that hears me.  
 Amen.

