

July 17, 2022
"The Better Part"
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 / Luke 10:38-42
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

As most of you know, Amy, Gabe and I were away last weekend for a family reunion near Boston – a gathering prompted by the death of my uncle, Jerry Rardin, in November, after a long struggle with Parkinson's disease. His funeral was held in January but, because of Covid concerns, only immediate family were able to attend the service in person.

And so Plan B, a summer reunion in his memory. It was a beautiful gathering.

As some of you know, my uncle Jerry, my dad's oldest brother, was the reason I moved from Baltimore to Philadelphia 26 years ago, almost to the day – after wrapping up two years as an AmeriCorps volunteer. With no idea where my life was headed. No clear sense of direction.

He, along with my aunt Sue, had been in Philly since the early 60s, raising their three sons here before eventually retiring to Massachusetts in 2007. They set me up with my first apartment, a third-floor rental at the home of their longtime friends in East Falls. That was just the first of many doors they opened for me over the years.

"Uncle J," as I came to call him, was a United Methodist pastor – serving a church in West Oak Lane, and for many years part of the staff at First UMC of Germantown (FUMCOG), before focusing his career as a pastoral counselor.

This was the uncle who baptized me when I was 11, during another family reunion in Ohio.

This was the uncle I never really knew until he invited me to join him on weekly trips to Washington, DC, for a class he was teaching on community at the renowned Church of the Saviour. He drove from Philly and picked me up in Baltimore on his way.

This was the uncle, along with my Aunt Sue, who helped me through my darkest years in Philly, when I first struggled with depression. This was the uncle who connected me with my first therapist, who turned out to be a godsend for my twenty- and thirty-something-year-old self.

This was the uncle who married me and Amy, right where I'm standing now.

This was the uncle whose death was recognized at this year's clergy session of our Eastern PA Annual Conference. His last session, as it were, was my first.

I miss him dearly.

His obituary named two of his family's favorite Jerry-isms: "take your anxieties, and nudge them toward curiosity" and "the Universe knows how to take care of you." It was further noted that he was well known and widely beloved as someone able to turn a maze into a labyrinth. He did that for many people, including me. Including Amy.

You are likely familiar with labyrinths. Ancient archetypes dating back at least 4,000 years, featuring a singular, meandering path leading to and from a distinct center (see bulletin cover). Used symbolically for walking meditation, for religious ritual and ceremony. Used to represent spiritual pilgrimage, a tool for personal, psychological and spiritual transformation.

Labyrinths serve to open up a deeper sense of groundedness, a clearer sense of direction, finding and reconnecting to your spiritual center, even when the path you're on feels all over the place. Even when the path itself feels like a maze.

In a maze, of course, you can easily lose your way – you're meant to; in a labyrinth, you're meant to find it. In a maze, there are many ways to go; in a labyrinth, there's only one. In a maze, you can feel hopelessly lost, disoriented, distracted, afraid; in a labyrinth, you can feel hope-FULLY found, balanced, focused, confident – trusting that

the path you're on will eventually lead you TO the center, and then back out again FROM that center.

That is the spiritual journey to which we are all called.

Labyrinths, and my uncle, were very much on my mind this week in reading and hearing again this story of the two sisters, Martha and Mary – as Mary Grey just read for us. It is a short story if ever there was one, only four verses long, but it is LONG on insight.

If you were around a few months ago, you may recall that we encountered another story about Martha and Mary, one found only in John's gospel; presumably the same Martha and Mary, though there's no way to know for sure.

THAT story followed Jesus' miraculous raising of Martha's and Mary's brother, Lazarus, from the dead. They threw Jesus a dinner party to celebrate, and while Martha served, Mary took costly perfume and anointed Jesus' feet – a profound, open-hearted, open-handed act both of hospitality and devotion. And not without its own controversy.

There is resonance in THIS story of the two sisters. Here Martha and Mary are presented in sharp contrast upon Jesus' arrival at their home. Martha is specifically named as the one who welcomes him, but then gets distracted by her many tasks. Her brand of hospitality. Meantime, Mary apparently doesn't lift a finger to help, simply and promptly sitting at Jesus' feet so she can listen closely to what he has to say.

It's easy to put ourselves in Martha's shoes. We can relate to Martha, most of us. Having heard that Jesus and the 12 were headed their way, we can picture her, perhaps, up late the night before, up early again that morning, cleaning the house, "redding up" as my mother-in-law likes to say. Straight out of Western Pennsylvania!

I know that's what we do when company's coming. You know what I'm talking about. The house always looks WAY better when we have guests than it ever looks when we don't!

Maybe Mary's out with friends, or lost in a book, or sleeping, while Martha does all the work of preparation. We can easily imagine Martha's blood starting to boil. We can relate to Martha, most of us.

Then Jesus arrives, but there's still so much to do to get the meal ready. She greets him at the door, and returns to the kitchen to check the fire and pour the tea. And she sees Mary, for God's sake, just sit down with Jesus. Are you serious, Mary?!

As far as we know, Martha doesn't ever ask Mary to help. As far as we know, she just lets her resentment build. And build. We can relate to Martha, most of us.

Her resentment continues to build before she finally goes not to Mary, but to Jesus, to speak her peace: "Lord, do you not care that my sister," MY OWN SISTER, "has left me to do all the work by myself?"

How carefully worded, her question. That, you'll recognize, is a LOADED question. It comes with some hefty baggage. You know a loaded question when you HEAR one, and you know a loaded question when you ASK one. Amen!

A question, of course, that Martha's already answered for herself. Clearly, Jesus, you don't care about me any more than my sister does.

It is a question as pitiable and passive-aggressive as not talking directly with Mary in the first place. You claim to be so loving and compassionate, Jesus, but you clearly don't care about me.

Martha goes on, boldly insisting that Jesus tell Mary to help her. This another ploy, one you'll recognize as textbook triangulation – attempting to have Jesus speak her peace for her, to pull Jesus into her growing conflict with Mary.

No mention, by the way, of Lazarus, IF this is indeed the same Martha and Mary as that story from John. Gender norms being what they were, he would not have been expected to do anything but sit with Jesus himself. We could understand if Martha was resentful of him, too – gender norms be damned.

In any case, Jesus, to his credit, refuses to get pulled into the triangle. “Martha, Martha,” is how he starts off. Maybe he's shaking his head and rolling his eyes as he does, but I don't think so. His response is more compassionate than all that.

“Martha, Martha,” I see you, I hear you, “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” I see you. I hear you. In this moment, you're in a maze. I hope you'll take your apron off and join me and your sister so we can see and hear each other in the labyrinth.

“Mary has chosen the better part,” the BETTER PART, “which will not be taken away from her.” You have your own choice to make, but don't take Mary's away from her.

Mary, in this moment, has chosen to express her hospitality, her devotion, by sitting at Jesus' feet. Listening. Being as fully present to him as she can be. Jesus affirms Mary's calling and clarity in THIS instance. And note here that he also affirms her blatant violation of existing gender norms and boundaries, sitting to study as a student, a disciple, along with the men, at the feet of her rabbi.

Martha often gets a bad rap in this story. The story ends with those words from Jesus, that Mary's better part will not be taken away from her. So we don't know how Martha responds.

But that's the beauty of a good story, a good parable, right? We are left to wrestle with it, to consider its lessons. And like I said, this story is packed full of lessons.

We could easily imagine Martha storming back to the kitchen, her tail fully between her legs, banging pots and pans so EVERYONE can hear how hard she is STILL working. By herself. Her frustration and irritation only increasing, now with Jesus AND Mary.

But that presumption draws an unhelpful and unnecessary line between Martha and Mary, and limits the lessons to be learned from the story; Martha's example simply a repudiation of busy-ness, of distraction, of overwork, overfunctioning, of life in a maze, and Mary's, on the flip side, a clear endorsement of slowing down, of listening, of focusing, of being fully present to the moment at hand, of life in a labyrinth.

Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the BETTER part in THIS instance, which acknowledges that there are other parts, important parts, that make up the whole. It takes all parts and all kinds along life's way, to be sure. Jesus does not choose sides here. He doesn't condemn Martha for her distracted, multi-tasking labor. He doesn't throw Martha under the bus. He invites her to greater self-awareness. And in so doing, he highlights the critical balance, the interdependence, of work and rest, action and contemplation. The very balance and interdependence we find at work in creation itself, from the very beginning.

We're not called to be Mary above Martha, but to be both. We are both. There is capacity and need for both in each of us. All of us.

Jesus points to the kind of thoughtful self-awareness, the kind of faithful spiritual seeking, that moves us ever closer to the "one thing," increasingly in touch with the BETTER PART. That moves our lives into greater alignment WITH and deeper grounding IN the things that really matter, that matter most at any given point. That calls our attention to the present moment, apart from the sometimes crippling obsession with what has been or the inevitable anxieties about what will yet be.

That invites us from maze to labyrinth.

“For everything there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven ...” The Ecclesiastes text is a familiar one, even in popular culture, and it offers some helpful perspective. But in light of this Martha and Mary story, I found myself drawn instead to the less familiar verses that follow. Beginning with verse 9.

“What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. God has made everything suitable to its time; moreover” – AND HEAR THIS ESPECIALLY – “God has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

We are blessed and cursed with the ability to hold both past and future in our minds. And we spend much of our lives, don't we, too much of our time, distracted by one or both. So often – speaking at least for myself – stuck in the maze. Unable to locate and claim our spiritual center in the present moment, the present opportunity, present company, right in front of us. In the midst of sometimes overwhelming distractions. In the midst of – or even when we manage to take a break from – our necessary labor.

These verses from Ecclesiastes offer divine perspective. We are blessed and cursed with a sense of past and future in our minds, but we are also reminded – as we need to be again and again – that past and future extend far beyond our own lives. Beyond our own blips on the radar.

Within that long, divine arc, there is a continuous invitation for all of us to move from maze to labyrinth. And to help each other do the same. To slow down. To listen. To resist the relentless pull of the “many things,” including so many things past and future, that so easily steal the attention of our hearts and minds and bodies. And instead focus our attention on the “one thing,” on what REALLY matters. To seek and find and connect to

our divine center; the better part, suitable to its time, as Ecclesiastes puts it. Trusting that it will not be taken away from us when we do.

There are so many lessons to be drawn from this story of Martha and Mary. I leave you to that sacred wrestling. For now, let me close now with a poetic take from retired pastor, Jeff Shrowder:

*Busy, distracted,
Martha saw no time to be
centered, attentive.
Despite the demands
it helps when things get busy
to take 'three deep breaths'.
Set one's heart on this;
to be, centered, attentive,
Mary's 'better part'.*

May it be so.