

The Rev. Jonathan H. Folts  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
Proper 11 C10 / July 11 / Luke 10:38-42

Although it hasn't been discovered yet, I believe that there is a special gene in our DNA coding that (when found) will be labeled, "The Martha Gene." And *what* is the Martha Gene you ask? The Martha gene is the gene that became activated whenever our mother or father would ask us to do a chore. At the precise moment that we were asked to take out the garbage, for instance, that gene was what enabled us to instantaneously recall how many times that *we've* taken out the garbage ~ and how many times that our brothers or sisters have taken out the garbage. I wasn't aware of the gene growing up, but let me tell you ~ now that I'm a father of t three children, I'm here to tell you that that gene is alive and well.

The conflict, of course, in our Gospel story, is a conflict between two sisters. On the *surface*, it seems to be a conflict between Martha, who is doing all the work that needs to be done; and Mary, her sister, who is sitting on the floor and listening to Jesus with the guys. And since Jesus is being heard in this story as confirming *Mary's* behavior over that of *Martha's*, it's logical step for us to believe that Jesus considers "being still and listening to him" more important than "doing good work" (or serving others). It *seems* like a logical step to take ~ but it's a misstep nonetheless.

For if you remember, just last Sunday, we heard the story about the Good Samaritan. And the focus of *that* story was certainly not on the person being still. Instead, the focus was on the person who was serving his neighbor. The main character of that story was not the man lying half-dead on the road. *He* was not the one whom

Jesus told us to emulate ~“Go, be like him, be still.” Jesus’ focus was on the *Good Samaritan* and, specifically, his *actions*. In *today’s* Gospel lesson, however, the focus is on *Mary* ~ and specifically, Mary’s choice to sit still and listen to what Jesus had to say. So in Luke’s Gospel, “doing good deeds of love to our neighbor” and “being still and listening to Jesus” are both important ~ both are very necessary in living out one’s Christian life to the fullest ~ and it cannot be said that one is more important than the other.

So what, in *today’s* story, is really going on? What is the *real* difference between Martha’s actions in this story and the actions of the Good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable? To find the answer to *that* question, we have no further to look than the context of today’s story.

Martha would have been in the kitchen or, more likely, she would have been outside at the fire, cooking. A woman of that time would *not* have been in the same room as the men, until it was time to serve them; much less would a woman be involved or listening to a conversation regarding religious matters or teachings. Instead, she would be engaged in serving ~ for that is the behavior that was expected at that time.

We can also logically assume that there was a large number of people to feed ~ more so, perhaps, than Martha had originally planned to serve. So Martha was therefore no doubt worried about the food, worried about getting the table prepared, worried about how many people were there, worried about how many more might come, worried about the fire, worried, worried, worried about so many little items and details ~ so that everything would be *perfect*. Now ~ note that Jesus never said that the actions that

Martha was doing was *wrong*. Jesus didn't say to her, "Martha, quit making dinner for us!" Jesus simply said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted about many things..." Worried, upset, anxious, disturbed, troubled or flustered ~ any of those words would have been adequate when describing Martha. Any of those words would adequately describe that feeling that Martha was preoccupied with. Martha was being worn out by her worrying. And her being worried wasn't doing her work any good.

*That*, and only that, was the difference between the actions of Martha and the actions of the Good Samaritan. Martha had let her worries get in the way of her work. She had allowed herself to be consumed by the details of the trivial, something that many of us can easily fall victim to every so often. And when we *do* fall victim to it ~ when we let our *worries* so overshadow whatever it is that we're doing ~ then it usually leaves us feeling afterwards as though we've missed something. Something very important.

Brides, for example, can become so occupied with the details of their wedding, that the event itself comes and goes...but afterwards, they feel as though they *missed* something. Clergy and church staff, altar guilds and choirs, can become so occupied with making Christmas and Easter services *perfect* ~ that those wonderful holy days come to an end and, they too, are left feeling as though they *missed* something. *Anyone* who is in charge of organizing *anything* can become so enmeshed in worrying about the details, so *entrenched* in worrying about getting every thing right ~ that the event, the moment, comes and goes...and the person is left feeling empty on the inside.

The *reason* that we have that empty feeling is rather simple to understand. We feel empty because we've missed an opportunity to receive what Jesus had wanted to

give us at that specific time and in that specific place. We've missed the opportunity to hear what Jesus had wanted us to hear ~ or to see whatever it was that Jesus wanted us to see in the situation. We've missed the opportunity because we allowed ourselves, like Martha, to become worn out by our worrying.

As a coincidence ~ or maybe it *wasn't* a coincidence ~ earlier this week, I was invited to come to the bedside of a patient who was dying at the Hospice Center in Branford. There were four terminally ill patients in the room where I was visiting, with each patient being surrounded by visiting family, friends, and clergy. And it struck me, once again, what a special blessing the Hospice program was for *everyone* in that room ~ patients, family members, and visitors alike. Because in the Hospice Program, the volunteers and staff take it upon themselves to tend to all the details that are involved in a patient's care and comfort. The patient's family and loved ones don't have to worry about any of that. Instead, they can concentrate all of their time and energy on simply being with each other, and receiving whatever Jesus wants them to receive in the time that is left. They can say and they can hear that which Jesus wants them to say and hear, without being distracted by worrying about details that are either being handled by others ~ or that can wait until later.

After making it clear that I was not there to discuss the minutiae of a future burial service ~ *that* conversation could obviously wait ~ we visited for a good while and then gathered around the patient's bedside. I conducted a service, which is the Episcopal version of Last Rites ~ while, at the same time, conversation at the other three bedsides in the room continued. (Those conversations were not distracting in the slightest.) When it

came time for the Lord's Prayer to be recited, however, all the conversation in that room *stopped* ~ and in unison, everyone said the Lord's Prayer together. It was if we were saying collectively, "We know that this time together is a *gift* ~ and we're not going to waste any of the precious time that God has given us by worrying. We are not going to waste a second of it by worrying about details that are either being handled by someone else ~ or by details that can wait. This time is a gift from God ~ and we are grateful for it." The people in that room, like Mary, chose the better part: namely, they chose the part that allows themselves to miss nothing of what Jesus wanted to give them.

As you live out your life this week? ~ as you live out your life this week, try and be *mindful* of those times when you feel yourself becoming worn with worry. And make yourself and God a mental promise that, when those times *do* arise, that you will ask God for assistance. When those times arise, ask God to help you move your worries enough to the side, so that the necessary space can be created for you to hear what Jesus wants to say to you ~ or to see what Jesus very much wants you to see. For by putting such a promise into practice, the practice itself becomes a holy habit ~ and we, too, will find that we have chosen the better part ~ and that *nothing* of importance in our lives will *ever* be taken away from us.