

“Messy Mary”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – July 17, 2022

Luke 10:38-42

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

This question, from Mary Oliver’s poem “The Summer Day,” is a great one to ask and answer on this particular summer day, as we think about the visit of Jesus to the house of Martha and Mary.

It’s a question we can ask the two women in this story.

What is it that you plan to do, Martha?

She might say, “Oh, straighten up the house, welcome Jesus, prepare a meal for him. This is my duty, after all. Anything else would bring shame on my family.”

And what is it that you plan to do, Mary?

“Sit at the Lord’s feet,” she says. “Listen to what he is teaching. I have just one ‘wild and precious life,’ so I’m going to use it to soak up the word of the Lord.”

So, one’s a worker.

And one’s a shirker.

The duty of a first-century Jewish woman is to help with household chores, and Mary knows this. By sitting at the feet of Jesus, she is acting like a man ... taking the place of a disciple! She’s violating a crystal-clear social boundary and bringing shame upon her house!

We know how the story ends, with Martha asking Jesus to put Mary in her place. “*TELL HER TO HELP ME,*” says Martha, assuming that Jesus will want their house to be in order. But Jesus answers her, “*MARTHA, MARTHA, YOU ARE WORRIED AND DISTRACTED BY MANY THINGS; THERE IS NEED OF ONLY ONE THING. MARY HAS CHOSEN THE BETTER PART, WHICH WILL NOT BE TAKEN AWAY FROM HER.*” (Luke 10:40-42)

Now, as enlightened 21st-century Christians, we might want to give Mary a thumbs-up, but the fact of the matter is that we tend to honor Martha in our day-to-day lives. We have a deep desire to be neat and tidy and organized, and we feel badly that our desks are overflowing with papers, our closets crammed full of clothes, and our garages and basements packed with tools, toys, sports equipment, and boxes of who-knows-what.

According to The New York Times, sales of home-organizing products keep going up and up, from \$5.9 billion in 2005 to a projected \$11.4 billion in 2021. That's a lot of accordion files and label-makers and plastic tubs.

That says it all. It supports the fact that we don't want to be Messy Marys. We really long to be Methodical Marthas ... with perfectly organized closets.

But there's a problem here. God wants us to take seriously the value of our "one wild and precious life." We must pay attention to Jesus when he honors Mary for listening instead of laboring. And we need to accept the fact that a perfectly organized life is not all that it's cracked up to be.

The New York Times reports that a new movement is afoot, one that calls you to embrace your disorder and "say yes to mess." Recent studies are revealing that

- messy desks are the marks of people with creative minds;
- messy closet owners are probably better parents than their tidier counterparts;
- really neat people are often humorless and inflexible.

So, if you were getting ready to call the National Association of Professional Organizers for a consultation with one of their clutter-busters, you might want to think again. Messy Mary might be a better model for us than Methodical Martha.

The power of Mary is that she has her priorities straight. Neatnik Martha fusses around in the kitchen, "*DISTRACTED BY HER MANY TASKS*" (v. 40), while Messy Mary leaves her stuff in a pile and plops down at the feet of Jesus. She's showing that she *loves the Lord her God with all her heart, all her soul, all her strength, and all her mind* (v. 27) — she's demonstrating her love of God by focusing intensely on his word.

Poor Martha, although she's fulfilling her social obligations, she's allowing her duties to distract her from hearing God's word. In this situation, she simply doesn't have her priorities straight.

Mary may be messy, but she keeps her priorities straight. She's like the teenager who skips a high-school dance to go on a church retreat. She's like the man who takes a week off from work to attend a conference on spiritual growth. She's like the woman who devotes an hour every week to leading a Bible study at a homeless shelter. She's like the family that makes a commitment to be in

worship every Sunday morning ... even on a Sunday like today, in the middle of the summer.

These priorities are critically important, but they're maintained at a cost. Just as Mary shattered social expectations and brought shame on her family by sitting at the feet of Jesus, those who focus on God's word are going to find themselves on a countercultural path.

Being a Messy Mary isn't always an easy way to be. But it's the very best way to grow closer to God. When we say yes to mess, we make obedience to Jesus a top priority — even higher than the organization of our closets. Instead of measuring out our lives with papers pushed or files organized, or e-mails answered, we choose instead to measure our lives with acts of faithfulness. We focus on listening to Jesus, loving God, serving our neighbors — and as we do this, we find that we have *“CHOSEN THE BETTER PART,” WHICH WILL NOT BE TAKEN AWAY FROM US.* (v. 42)

- When we say yes to mess, we open our ears to what Jesus is saying to us in Bible study. We don't spend our time telling Jesus what we want to do.
- When we say yes to mess, we open our calendars to what God is scheduling us to do. We don't limit our church participation to Sunday mornings.
- When we say yes to mess, we open our wallets to what the Holy Spirit is inspiring us to support. We don't confine our charitable giving to whatever is left over after everything else is paid.

Of course, to say yes to mess is not to let everything spiral out of control. It's still important to cook nutritious meals for our children, pay mortgages and utility bills on time, and maintain good tax records in case we ever get a friendly call from the IRS. But these activities should be kept in their proper place, and not allowed to distract us from the higher priority of hearing the word of our Lord. To say yes to mess is to be willing to lay everything else aside and pay attention to Christ's teachings.

If we do, we'll find that God has given us one wild and precious life, a life that can be filled with love and challenge and comfort and purpose. It's a life that may be messy at times but is always filled with meaning.

Put down the closet organizer and walk away. It's time to take a seat at Jesus' feet.