

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Subtraction by Distraction”**

**Psalm 52
Luke 10:38 – 42**

July 17, 2016

Some of you are no doubt familiar with the expression, “addition by subtraction.” Addition by subtraction is a kind of counterintuitive concept, in which something is made better, or stronger, or more efficient... by the *removal*, or subtraction, of something else. For example, the pruning of rose bushes and other plants is “addition by subtraction:” by cutting away dead or diseased parts of the plant, or cutting back the branches in various ways, we help the plant to grow healthier... by removing that which would otherwise tend to hold it back.

And the athletic world is full of examples of “addition by subtraction,” when a player who’s underperforming or behaving badly is either traded, or cut from the team. Back in 2004, the Angels had a leftfielder name Carlos Guillen, who was one of the leading hitters in the American League that year. But Guillen’s behavior was so insubordinate and churlish, that it was having a detrimental effect on team chemistry and unity. So, even though Guillen had been hitting the cover off the ball, the Angels cut him... just to be rid of his toxic attitude. And, not coincidentally, the Angels then went on to win their division and make the playoffs. The improvement in team esprit-de-corps and effectiveness was an *addition*, which they achieved through the *subtraction* of a good player who was more interested in himself than the good of the team.

And, of course, many people believe that a sermon achieves an *addition* of effectiveness... by the *subtraction* of several minutes of pastoral pontificating! And, fear not! I promise to do my best to put that theory to the test this morning!

Anyway, that’s “addition by subtraction...” and you could probably all share examples of this phenomenon from your own experience. But, this morning, we’re going to turn that principle upside down a little bit... and consider the related phenomenon of “subtraction by addition.” With “subtraction by addition,” *adding* something to a given situation, actually *subtracts* something from it... making it less, somehow, than it was before. And in the specific case that we’re going to look at today, what’s added is *distraction*... which then results in some serious spiritual *subtraction*. Hence, the title of the sermon: “Subtraction by Distraction.” So let’s take a look at our gospel lesson from Luke, and see just how this principle works.

In our text, Jesus is on the road with His disciples, probably on His way to Jerusalem, teaching about the kingdom of God. Luke tells us that they came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him; and we’re also told that Martha had a sister named Mary. The unnamed village is most likely the town of Bethany, in the province of Judea, not far from Jerusalem. And the sisters, Martha and Mary, are almost certainly the same sisters mentioned in the Gospel of John, whose brother, Lazarus, Jesus raised from the dead. All of which simply means that Jesus may well have known this family previously... which may explain why He showed up at their home, seeking rest, food, and shelter. Hospitality in ancient Palestine was a very big deal; especially when your guests were well-known and beloved friends of the family. So there is no way that Martha and Mary *wouldn’t* have opened their home to Jesus and His friends.

Okay, so far, so good. But then Luke introduces a friction point into the story; a brewing conflict between Martha, who’s working feverishly to get dinner on the table... and Mary, who’s

sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to His preaching and teaching. As has no doubt happened to all of us at one time or another, as we've tried to prepare our home for guests, Martha becomes exasperated over the lack of assistance being rendered by her sister. While Mary sits idly by, Martha is doing all the work; and in a fit of frustration, she finally blurts out to Jesus, "*Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!*"

Which makes perfect sense, yes? When you've got a big job to do, you want all available hands to come on deck and help out, right? I mean, I don't know how many times Sylvia's said to me something like, "*You going to sit on your duff all day watching football, or are you going to help get the house straightened up before our dinner guests get here!*" Of course, it's one thing to complain to your husband, who might just say, "*Actually, I'm going to sit on my duff watching football!*" But it's another thing to complain to Jesus, who really has the clout to intervene and make things happen! And that, undoubtedly, is precisely what Martha was hoping Jesus would do.

Now, it's important for us to understand that, all other things being equal, Martha had a point, and she was not out of line to speak to Jesus as she did. As I said before, in Martha and Mary's culture, hospitality was critically important... and Martha had every right to expect Mary to get up and lend a hand. That would have been the right thing to do in pretty much every single other case. But *this* particular case was different. And this was one time when hospitality, important as it was, needed to take a backseat to sitting, and listening, and learning. And so, Jesus responded to Martha's harried request for some divine household intervention, by telling her:

"Martha, Martha. You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." In other words, Jesus is saying, "*Martha, we're fine. A little bread, a little water, and a place to lay our heads for the night, is all we need. So lay down your rolling pin, take off your apron, and come join us. You're way, way busier than you need to be!*"

Now, some New Testament scholars, including the highly respected N.T. Wright, point out that the *theological* message of this passage has to do with the fact that, in allowing Mary to "sit at His feet" and be a listener and learner, Jesus was actually breaking down the traditional barriers between men and women. In the Palestinian culture of Jesus' day, sitting and learning from the rabbi was a man's place... and *only* a man's place. Women simply weren't allowed to join in the reindeer game of learning about the kingdom of God. *A woman's* place was in the kitchen; cooking, cleaning, preparing, serving, and so forth. So, from a cultural point of view, Martha was in her proper place, fulfilling her proper role; but Mary was breaking the rules and trying to act like a man, which was very much verboten in that day and age.

But when Jesus affirmed Mary's place among the learners, and gently chided Martha for worrying about too many things, He was saying very clearly that, in God's kingdom, men and women were equals... and needed to be treated as such. And, although Luke doesn't really comment on it, this action by Jesus would have raised many eyebrows among the religious and societal leaders of the day.

Now, it's very possible that Jesus really *was* attempting to break down some barriers between men and women that day; our Lord was always trying to build bridges to marginalized people, and to overcome the social distinctions which so often kept people alienated from each other. But for our purposes this morning, I want to stay focused on the very bland, very mundane issue of Martha being so stressed and busy that she missed the most important thing that was going on right under her very own roof: the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God Himself, the Savior of the world... had come to pay her a visit!

And even though this singularly important, potentially life-altering, all-time great thing was happening right in front of her face; Martha was all but missing it. And why? Because she was distracted. Because she had too many things on her mind. Because she was overly busy, overly stressed, overly preoccupied with superficial matters.

When Martha came charging out of the kitchen to plead with Jesus to tell her sister to help her, she was completely immersed in “subtraction by distraction.” She couldn’t see Jesus; she couldn’t hear Jesus; she couldn’t appreciate Jesus; because of all the stuff flying around in her head. And if Jesus hadn’t taken her by the shoulders, sat her down, and said “Martha, chill out and relax!” She might have missed out completely on the blessing of His visit; and the power of his teaching; and all the grace and love which was in His power to give her. And that would have been a real shame.

The question for us this morning is, do we, like Martha, sometimes experience “subtraction by distraction” in our relationship with the Lord? Like her, are we sometimes so busy that we’ve little time and energy left to reflect on our life with God? Are we sometimes so stressed and preoccupied that we wouldn’t notice Jesus if we ran right into Him walking down Main Street? Are we sometimes so completely absorbed with the things of earth, that we pay no attention to the things of heaven?

We all know from firsthand experience that it’s really, really easy to slip into all-out Martha mode! There are so many things that we have to do; there are so many places that we have to go; there are so many people that we have to please; there are so many responsibilities that we have to fulfill; there’s so much of *everything* under the sun... that taking even a little bit of time to clear our heads and nourish our souls, may leave us feeling guilty and lazy.

And if and when we reach that point, it has a definite “subtraction” effect on our life of Christian faith. When we don’t have the time or energy to even think... we really do become “less” as Jesus’ disciples. When we’re so distracted that we don’t even realize that God Almighty is walking right beside us... then it’s time to make like Mary, take a seat, and give our undivided attention to Jesus; if just for a little while.

And maybe this can be our goal, as we make our way through the rest of the summer... one of the most “distractable” times of the whole year! Maybe we can make the commitment, amid all the activities and excursions of this season, to spend just a little more time in prayer; just a teensy bit more time reading the Bible; just a scosh more time turning our hearts and minds to the things of heaven.

And, hey, this doesn’t mean that all busyness is bad; or that all distraction is sinful; or that it’s wrong to be active and involved in all the responsibilities of life! Of course not! Remember: on the whole, Martha was basically doing the right thing! I’m just saying that, if we start to be *overwhelmed* by it all... then it’s not such a good thing, and then we need to take a step back and get our life, and our faith, back in perspective. That, at the end of the day, was the gist of Jesus’ counsel to Martha. And it’s good counsel for us, too!

As we make our way into the week ahead, let’s do our best to avoid Martha-like “subtraction by distraction.” And let’s be encouraged to keep our hearts, and our minds, and our souls open to all that our Lord has for us.

For that’s what the life of faith is all about! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.