

Our son Luke turned 21 in April. It used to be a big deal a long time ago; turning 21. It was the age of majority the world over and the Sunrisers could take him for a year-end luncheon to any pub anywhere. When someone reaches this milestone, gifts come in quantities of 21; 21 pairs of socks, 21 boxes of dental floss, 21 chicken wings, 21 sets of shoelaces. For her birthday I gave to my older sister 21 \$2 dollar bills. A year later she gave to me 21 \$5 cheques. 21...it's a year to focus, get organized and look forward. To celebrate Luke's birthday, Sheila and I gave him a prerequisite gift in quantities of 21 AND we invited some of his friends over for cake and ice-cream and some libations. I swear they each brought 21 bottles of beer. Kids these days.

When we were sitting at the dining room table enjoying the cake, Luke's friends got into a pattern of telling Luke stories one after another. I told the story of what happened when he came into the world. Other's talked about what they did on band trips and overnight hikes. Some of this his parents didn't need to know, but it was really fun. 21 year old energy is amazing and Sheila and I really enjoyed our time that night.

But there was another really odd pattern of behavior in which most of the kids participated. From time to time each of the kids would stop their participation in the conversation to take their iPhones and Cell Phones out of their pockets to see who had texted them. We could all hear the darn things vibrate in their pockets. And then the one who got the text spent the next twenty minutes completely disengaged in the conversation, texting back and forth to the person who was not there. One person was texting while I was telling the story of Luke's birth...she missed the story completely. Sheila and I noticed the behavior and were kind of surprised by it, thinking it kind of rude that they would do that at the table, while they were celebrating with Luke. But the rest of the kids weren't fazed by it all. This is how they communicate all the time. It's how they live their lives. I may just have to adapt.

Since that time, I've been noticing how often that happens, not just at a dining table, but anywhere. Often, lately, I have been mid-sentence in conversation with someone, who, when upon getting the telltale vibration in their pocket, would hold up a finger, pull out the blackberry, receive a text and respond. By the time the person was finished texting, I would have forgotten completely anything I had been saying. We would part and I'd scratch my head. Another distraction, another interruption. The blackberry or any version of wireless communication device, the iPhone, is just one kind of distraction. With note pads, ipods, cell phones, email, unrelenting schedules, over commitments with too many promises made, ours is a culture distracted by many things.

The story Marion read for us this morning is another of those cultural icons. You've hear the expression, "I played Martha to her Mary." Every time this text shows up in the lectionary, I get feeling a little uneasy. The potential to annoy those who identify with Martha is just as high as for those who identify with Mary. I will say, I hate cleaning up after a meal, doing the dishes, wiping the table, . I remember at family dinners at Sheila's house, when supper was over, I would make a point of asking her father, a United Church minister, anything about the bible, or a recent church decision, or the book he's currently reading, engaging him in a discussion that kept me at the table. The conversation wasn't always particularly interesting but at least I didn't have to do the dishes. Eventually, I figured out that if I wanted to be invited back, I needed to help in the kitchen but I only ever washed the dishes. I absolutely hate drying the dishes....weird huh. Come to think of it, I think Sheila's dad stayed to answer my questions because he didn't like dishes any more than I did.

I can imagine that any woman who hears this text this morning, who belongs to a church with three different UCW units – one whose purpose is service and hospitality, one with a social justice bent, while the third is more concerned about spiritual development and relationships - will recognize the hook. At first blush, Luke has Jesus telling Martha that Mary's role of study and reflection, listening with an open heart is a better choice over the busy work of hospitality. When Martha complains, you can almost hear Jesus' patronizing voice as he responds, using her name twice. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things..." Any women here bristling this morning? Anyone sitting here thinking; ``it's easy for Jesus to tell Martha that Mary's choice to listen at his feet was the better choice...he just ate a meal someone else had to cook? ``

I don't believe Luke's intention for telling this story is to set up a competition between women, or UCW units for that matter. Neither do I believe that Luke isn't as concerned about loving hospitality. There are a couple of things I'd like to point out in the story. You'll notice that Luke says "Jesus entered a certain village where a woman named Martha, welcomed him into HER home." There is no man here; this is Martha's home and she is fulfilling the role of host, a traditional role of men, welcoming Jesus into her home. But then her role is subverted as she undertakes the detail of preparing and serving a meal. The role of host gets lost.

The next thing we notice is that Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to what he was saying. If you scour the gospels you'll notice that sitting at Jesus feet was the posture of a disciple, particularly a disciple being instructed. In Jewish society, this is a position also usually reserved for men, as they studied and took council from their teachers and mentors. Mary stays and Jesus approves. Like Martha, in this moment Mary is assuming a role usually reserved for men.

At the outset both women are in reversed gender roles...this is significant as we consider the place of women in this society. In this male dominated society, Luke is reminding us that in Jesus' new world, women were equal to men.

However, the thorny issue of busy verses listening seems to remain. But when we consider that this story shows up in Luke's treatment of the cost of discipleship, what it means to be a follower of Jesus, I think Luke is simply saying, listening and reflection is just as important as hospitality. It's not one or the other, it's both and. If we take this idea one step further, as we think about how each of us is gifted spiritually, perhaps Mary was simply pursuing her Spirit Given gift of discipleship while Martha was pursuing her Spirit Given gift of hospitality. When Martha complains that Mary isn't like her, Jesus recognizes the distraction and the lure. "Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing (and here I wonder if Jesus isn't thinking – be who you are Martha....Mary is being who she is.) Mary has chosen the better part, it won't be taken from her." Martha would have Mary become like she is...and the gift of listening would be lost. Just like the girl who was distracted by her blackberry when I told the story of our son's birth. Something always gets lost in the distraction.

I think this story speaks directly to church boards as we think about where churches are headed and how they make decisions. For those who have ever served on a church board, or any other board of a community organization you'll know that typically, there isn't a decision that doesn't come before the board. In fact, in churches where the building is showing its age and the boiler is about to blow, where participation (marked by offerings) is dwindling and volunteer committees are losing people, the board gets more and more distracted by the day to day – the cleaning contract, the broken windows, the heating bill, how long will the roof hold out, when will the carpets be cleaned, how do we change the lightbulbs, when will communion be served, where should the fall fair signs go. Board meetings get longer, anxiety over survival increases and fatigue sets in. And the only way you can tell where the church is going is to look back and see where it's been. There is absolutely no capacity for discernment and planning. There is no capacity to listen for the leaning of the Spirit, to search the longing of the congregation and to heed the call of the neighborhood. The board is just too busy running the church.

What is remarkable about the decision you made at the annual general meeting, to adopt a transitional form of governance, was the decision to carve out a place for listening, discernment and thoughtful planning. You have given that responsibility to the Board of the Governance. Their job is to listen to you, to listen to the nudge of the Spirit and the wisdom of community so they help us decide what we want to do. Their job is to help us discern what we want as a congregation and where we want to go.

You've taken from them the distractions of running the church. This transitional structure places that responsibility on the person who is here anyway, and most of the time. That's me.

In this transitional governance structure, you have given back to the Board their responsibility to be Mary. They will help us determine what we want to do as a congregation and where we want to go. This transitional structure gives to me the responsibility to be Martha or at least make sure the busy work of the church is accomplished. (I might even have to dry the dishes). The Board of Governance will tell me how they want me function. They will draw boundaries around my work and hold me accountable if I don't meet the mission we have discerned, or if I work outside the boundaries set.

Church boards have been distracted by many things, and we have not fully listened to the Spirit calling us into a different future. The decision you made at the annual meeting arrests that distraction. This is good news. I doesn't look or feel like church, because we have never done it that way before. But you the definition of lunacy – doing the same things and expecting a different result. No we have never done it that way before. I remember those words spoken from this pulpit some 9 months ago. We have none done it that way before – followed by? Hallelujah. (repeat) Hallelujah indeed. Amen.