This scripture passage has been on my heart for many years and it was not until I finally sat down and gave it some dedicated intentional time that I have finally made peace with it. The popular interpretation has Martha and Mary pitted against each other making the Martha’s of the world (me) feel like schmucks while still justifying our behavior. It is also one of the scripture passages used to validate women in ministry, for it was unheard of for a woman to sit at the feet of a rabbi for instruction up until that time.

I however, was drawn to the idea that when we **choose to worry** instead of pray, **AND IT IS A CHOICE**, our focus turns from God to ourselves, from the divine to the earthly, from promise to fret. What does our attitude look like when we worry? When we worry we are drawn into the great myth of self-reliance that is nothing short of evil at work in our lives.

That is not to say that **concern** is not a valid part of our makeup. Quoting from *Having a Mary heart in a Martha World*, “Pastor and teacher Gary E. Gilley sums up the difference like this: **Worry** is allowing problems and distress to come between us and the heart of God. It is the view that God has somehow lost control of the situation and we cannot trust Him. **A legitimate concern** presses us closer to the heart of God and causes us to lean and trust on Him all the more.”

Our attitude when we worry is not godlike. It is not healthy. And according to the sign that used to be on the road headed to Dyea, it’s a waste of imagination. That may be why there are over 350 citations telling us “fear not” in the bible. There was a really great story from the *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* that I would like to share with you because I think it is tangible and something you can put in your pocket to use yourselves in the future. So as you hear this story consider how worry and frustration shift the man’s focus.

“You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.” Luke 10:41-42

The story is told of a man who met God in a lovely valley one day!

“How are you this morning?” God asked the fellow.

“I’m fine, thank you,” the man replied. “Is there anything I can do for you today?”

“Yes, there is,” God said. “I have a wagon with three stones in it and I need someone to pull it up the hill for me. Are you willing?”

“Yes, I’d love to do something for you. Those stones don’t look very heavy and the wagon’s in good shape. I’d be happy to do that. Where would you like me to take it?”

God gave the man specific instructions, sketching a map in the dust at the side of the road. “Go through the woods and up the road that winds up the side of the hill. Once you get to the top, just leave the wagon there. Thank you for your willingness to help me today.”

“No problem!” the man replies and sets off cheerfully. The wagon pulled a bit behind him, but the burden was an easy one. He began to whistle as he walked quickly through the forest. The sun peeked through the trees and warmed his back. What a joy to be able to help the Lord, he thought, enjoying the beautiful day.

Just around the third bend, he walked into a small village. People smiled and greeted him. Then, at the last house, a man stopped him and asked, “How are you this morning? What a nice wagon you have. Where are you off to?”

“Well, God have me a job this morning. I’m delivering these three stones to the top of the hill.”

“My goodness! Can you believe it? I was just praying this morning about how I was going to get this rock I have up to the mountain,” the man told him with great excitement. “You don’t suppose you could take it up there for me? It would be such an answer to prayer.”

The man with the wagon smiled and said, “Of course. I don’t suppose God would mind. Just put it behind the other three stones.” Then he set off with three stones and a rock pulling behind him.

The wagon seemed a bit heavier. He could feel the jolt of each bump, and the wagon seemed to pull to one side a bit. The man stopped to adjust the load as he sang a hymn of praise, pleased to be helping out a brother as he served God. Then he set off again and soon reached another small village at the side of the road. A good friend lived there and offered him a glass of cider.

“You’re going to the top of the hill?” his oldest friend asked.

“Yes! I am so excited. Can you imagine, God gave me something to do!”

“Hey!” said his friend. “I need this bag of pebbles taken up. I’ve been so worried that it might not get taken care of since I haven’t any time to do it myself. But you could fit it in right between the three stones here in the middle.” With that, he placed his burden in the wagon.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” the man said. “I think I can handle it.” He finished the cider, then stood up and brushed his hands on his overalls before gripping the handle of the wagon. He waved good-bye and began to pull the wagon back onto the road.

The wagon was definitely tugging on his arm now, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. As he started up the incline, he began to feel the weight of the three stones, the rock and the pebbles. Still, it felt good to help a friend. Surely God would be proud of how energetic and helpful he’d been.

One little stop followed another, and the wagon grew fuller and fuller. The sun was hot above the man pulling it, and his shoulders ached with the strain. The songs of praise and thanksgiving that had filled his heard had long since left his lips as resentment began to build inside. Surely this wasn’t what he’d signed up for that morning. God had given him a burden heavier than he could bear.

The wagon felt huge and awkward as it lumbered and swayed over the ruts in the road. Frustrated, the man was beginning to have visions of giving up and letting the wagon roll backward. God was playing a cruel game with him. The wagon lurched, and the load of obligations collided with the back of his legs leaving bruises. “This is it!” he fumed. “God can’t expect me to haul this all the way up the mountain.”

“Oh God,” he wailed. “This is too hard for me! I thought you were behind this trip, but I am overcome by the heaviness of it. You’ll have to get someone else to do it. I am just not strong enough.”

As he prayed, God came to his side. “Sounds like you’re having a hard time. What’s the problem?”

“You gave me a job that is too hard for me,” the man sobbed. “I’m just not up to it!” God walked over to where the wagon was braced with a stone. “What is this?” He held up the bag of pebbles.

“That belongs to John, my good friend. He didn’t have time to bring it up himself. I thought I would help.”

“And this? God tumbled two pieces of shale over the side of the wagon as the man tried to explain.

God continued to unload the wagon, removing both light and heavy items. They dropped to the ground, the dust swirling up around them. The man who had hoped to help God grew silent. “If you will be content to let others take their own burdens,” God told him, “I will help you with your task.”

“But I promised I would help! I can’t leave these things lying here.”

“Let others shoulder their own belongings,” God said gently. “ I know you were trying to help, but when you are weighted down with all these cares you cannot do what I have asked of you.”

The man jumped to his feet, suddenly realizing the freedom God was offering. “You mean I only have to take the three stones after all?” he asked.

“That is all I asked you to do,” God smiled. “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light. I will never ask you to carry more than you can bear.”

“I can do that!” said the man, grinning from ear to ear. He grabbed the wagon handle and set off once and again, leaving the rest of the burdens beside the road. The wagon still lurched and jolted lightly, but he hardly noticed.

A new song filled his lips, and he noticed a fragrant breeze wafting over the path. With great joy he reached the top of the hill. It had been a wonderful day, for he had done what the Lord had asked.

As I finished reading this story, immediately I thought to myself, but **what about the commitments he had made to the others**. Will he go back and make a second run? What will his friends think of him if he abandons them?

Then a smile crossed my face. I could almost hear the Lord softly saying to me, “Jan Marie, Jan Marie, to every story there are many parts, but for you I wish you to take away the better part, that part that sets your eyes on me.”

When we worry we aren’t fixated on God. What was Martha worried about? Jesus responds to her saying, “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.” What was she worried about?

While the story does not tell us how fancy or simple of a meal she was preparing, we do know that in the culture at the time, hosting elaborate parties was common practice for the Jewish people. Furthermore, when hosting unexpected guests the expectations were even higher, because anyone could throw a good party with advance notice and planning. So it is reasonable to interpolate Martha had much more going on than a kettle of bean soup and a loaf of bread. Why was she worried?

The most frequently used word in Greek in the NT used for the word for worry is *mer*id*zoe* and translates “to be divided, to be pulled in opposite directions, to choke.” Mary was peacefully **focused** on that one better thing, unlike Martha who found herself pulled in many directions. Without knowing specifically what she was focused on, we know it wasn’t simply serving the Lord … and that my friends is where we all need to stop and pray.

So let’s do that. Please, let’s all bow our heads and pray. Lord, we thank you for calling us to this place. We thank you for sending your son to show us the way. We thank you for the sacrifices made on our behalf. We hang our heads knowing we have disappointed you and sadden you when our focus was everywhere but on you. Please Lord God, open our hearts and minds to hear your message. We pray that the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you oh Lord God almighty. Amen

The question becomes, What was she worried about? Who was Martha focused on? Her eyes, her concern, was on herself. She was so focused on herself and the to do list she had no doubt created, that she **actually had the gumption** to ask the Lord to **step up** and put Mary in her place. She had the **audacity** to accuse the Lord of not caring **and then** then she went on to tell him what to do. “Tell her to help me.”

Jesus could have responded in many ways. Instead of reprimanding her, he lovingly and gently rebukes her, saying, “Martha, Martha, …” Saying her name twice was an expression of endearment.

I was drawn to **this** text **this week**, because Ryan pulled a Martha on me a last month. While hosting the meal for the VBS group, I had everything laid out and John was there to help. Things were going smoothly. I had labeled what was vegetarian and what was gluten free with nice little tags. We were good to go. And I was safely tucked away on the back side of the serving line. Smiling, accepting accolades for serving tacos, and the vegetarian protein for the tacos, and whatever I had made up for desserts. Ryan came through the line, and smiling, said to me, “If you want to sit and visit with some of the leaders, you had better grab a plate, otherwise the tables will all fill up.” He was responding to my whining at the session meeting last week, that we couldn’t very well fellowship with the group if they kept to themselves and if the tables were filled up by the time everyone went through the line. He was pointing out that I could solve my own problem, if I let go of my worries of being uncomfortable, leaving my hosting position before everyone was fed, etc… If my greatest desire was to serve God, not remain in my comfort zone.

However, I was in full-on Martha mode and worried about re-stocking anything that got low, answering questions about ingredients, and generally staying in my comfort zone behind the table. And after all, isn’t it our custom to serve ourselves last, after everyone else has had an opportunity. What would people think if I served myself early? My focus was everywhere **but** on God’s calling for me to fellowship with the folks that generously spend their time, their money, and their vacations, to come here and teach our kids about Christ. Shame on me. As I went through the line after everyone had served themselves, I found that Heather, the VBS leader, had saved a seat for me. Ryan, Heather and God were all diligently at work to get me out of my boat and into a life of following God, in each and every step of my day.

Later I was able to reflect back on the evening and see the *Martha & Mary story* playing itself out for me, as it has so many times in my life. Our pastor and our elders are tasked with the job of rebuking us when it’s appropriate. But one of the many downsides of our modern society, is the lack of support for this practice. At the last Presbytery meeting I attended with all the SE Alaska Churches in Haines, Dr. Henry Faucett talked passionately about the responsibilities of the church elders. He literally **chastised us** for not taking up our charge and leaving it all to the pastor. So when Ryan so thoughtfully rebuked me that evening, I was thankful. Thankful he was willing and that I could hear. It is never easy to rebuke or reprimand a friend, a child, a spouse, or a partner, but there are times it is necessary in order for God to work his will. Ryan suggested I take the extra stones out of my cart and joyfully go about the task that God wanted for me. *Having a Mary heart in a Martha* world said it like this: “he loved her too much to give her what she wanted. Instead, Jesus gave her what she needed – an invitation to draw close to him. With open arms, he invited the troubled woman to leave her worries and cares and find refuge in him alone.” Revelation 3:19 says it like this, “I correct and discipline everyone I love. So be diligent and turn from your indifference.”

Bryne’s Hospitality of God said this: “Frantic service, even in service of the Lord, can be a deceptive distraction from what the Lord really wants.” Those of you who have read the Screwtape Letters will be reminded of how tricky evil can be as it worms its way between you and God.

Bryne goes on to further say, “Luke has already warned that the grasp of the world can be choked by the worries of life. Here the cares and worries seem well justified – are they not in the service of the Lord? But precisely therein lies the power of temptation, the great deceit. True hospitality – even given directly to the Lord – attends to what the guest really wants.”

We don’t know if the refuge Jesus offered was at his feet alongside Mary, or going about her tasks of preparing a meal and board for her guests, without worry. We **do know** that in Colossians Paul tells us to “work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.” While that is literally what Martha was doing, being worried and upset took her focus away from what he wanted most. I am not convinced Martha belonged next to her sister. I am however convinced that if she had not been distracted by things like doing more than her fair share, her attitude would have been better and she could have been focused entirely on God as she prepared for her guests.

So how do we know when to say yes and when to say no? How much is too much and what is falling short? **Pray about everything**. The Bible tells us, “Don’t be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

I wonder what would have happened if Martha had given a prayer of thanksgiving and given her request to God from a place of gratitude instead of demanding he make things fair from a worldly standpoint. What if she had instead said, “Thank you Lord, for coming to my home. For sharing your wisdom and insight, especially with Mary for it is not often that a woman is welcomed into the teacher’s fold. I know not how, by myself, I can take care of all these preparations, but I pray that you open my eyes and heart to what is most important to you and I shall joyfully respond.” Oh, if we all had the forethought to go about our days with such a mindset.

I will close with Paul’s writings to the Philippians, “Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice. Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

Don’t worry about anything; instead pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing! Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right and pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me – everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

AMEN