When reading and interpreting the Bible, it is a good rule of thumb to pay attention to the surrounding stories in the narrative for clues about the meaning of each individual story. The Gospel of Luke has been written as a kind of “Part I” narrative, with “Part II” being the Book of Acts. This means that Luke and Acts form a kind of narrative whole, and images and themes from the Gospel of Luke will repeat in the Book of Acts to reflect the church’s continuity with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

So, this story of Martha and Mary should be read alongside the story of the Good Samaritan, which we heard last week. But it should also be read together with what has come before it in Luke’s Gospel.
and what will come after it in the Book of Acts.

This text has often been read with the assumption that Mary and Martha are compared against one another, and that Martha simply cannot put down the housework long enough to visit with Jesus. This is undoubtedly the bias of a male-dominated tradition, and it obscures the actual ministerial leadership of these two women in the early church’s ministry. If we look to Mary and Martha as partners in ministry, as some interpreters have suggested, we can glean a bit more from this story as ministers of the Gospel in the 21st century.

We have, since the beginning of the Season after Pentecost, heard of the missionary activity
of the disciples of Jesus. Jesus has commissioned both the twelve and the Seventy, sending them on their way to enter towns and villages, proclaiming the good news. They are to accept the hospitality of strangers and eat with them, proclaiming peace to their homes when they are welcomed as guests. They are to cure the sick and proclaim the imminence of God’s Kingdom.

It is no coincidence, then, that Jesus is also on his way, and has entered a certain village. Martha, in welcoming Jesus into her home, has identified herself to us as a “Child of Peace,” one who has received the good news of God’s Kingdom. Her primary act of hospitality is a sign to the reader that this is one of those blessed homes of welcome,
upon which the peace of God has been spoken.
Martha and her “sister” Mary
are disciples of Jesus,
eager to share in this news
of God’s imminent
and in-breaking kingdom.

Looking forward into the book of Acts,
we can perhaps come
to a better understanding
of Martha’s “many tasks.”
This is, given the context,
a very bland translation.
This might better be translated,
“many ministries.”
The word translated “tasks” for us
is the same word
from which we get our word “deacon,”
and it comes up
again and again
The work of the seven deacons
chosen in Acts chapter 6
is identified by the same word,
including Stephen, the first martyr,
and Phillip,
who evangelized and baptized
the Ethiopian Eunuch.
I am inclined to think of Martha,
not as one busy
with housework
and kitchen chores,
but one who is overwhelmed
by the outrageous demand
that ministry places
on any community
committed to following Jesus
in a life marked
by the Kingdom of God.¹

Imagine instead
that Martha has welcomed Jesus
into her home,
has given him something to eat,
and has returned to the line
of sick and hungry poor at her door.
She has collected the money from her community
to be distributed to them
at her discretion,
and she is overseeing

the feeding of those who are hungry. She is offering oil for anointing the sick, and she is speaking of God’s Kingdom to those many who have come to her door for respite and good news.

We might now approach Martha with a bit more reverence and understanding. This is an early leader in the church, and her partner in ministry, her “sister,” is sitting with Jesus as she carries out the ministry of the Kingdom to their community. She comes to Jesus with this concern, asking him to intervene and command her sister to support her in this overwhelming ministry.

Understood this way, we can now hear Jesus’ response to Martha as a surprising one, the kind of teaching
we are used to hearing
from this strange God-made-flesh.

“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.”

What? Is she not carrying out
the good work of ministry?
Why aren’t you and Mary
going up to help Martha out?

But Jesus has revealed
more than we might first catch.
Martha is worried and distracted.
She is anxious.
The work has become
a burden and distraction
such that she can no longer do this
with gladness and singleness of heart.
The “better portion”
that Mary has chosen
is not to sit rather than be a minister;
the better portion
is the one that dispels anxiety
and reorients the mind, body, soul,
and strength of the disciple
toward the vision of the Kingdom
revealed in the face of Jesus.
It is the portion
that reassures the disciple
that the Kingdom’s coming
is not a burden
on the shoulders of the disciple
but is the work of God in Jesus Christ.
Martha has come to Jesus for help,
and he is offering help
she did not expect or intend –
the one thing she needed.

We are part of a church –
the Episcopal Church –
that is very socially active.
This parish has
quite a few ministries of its own,
and that can be a wonderful thing
for us and for our neighbors.
And the Episcopal Church
has a beautiful worship resource
in the Book of Common Prayer.
Its form
as well as its often-overlooked flexibility
provide us with a pattern of worship
that is meant to shape our imagination
toward the one thing that is needful.

When we enter this space each week,
we come to the feet of Jesus.
There is a danger in busying ourselves
with many ministries,
and in many places,
*overwhelmed by the pragmatism of its service*,
the church has forgotten
why it worships.
Why is gathering, listening, praying, singing,
eating and drinking the gifts of God
for the people of God
important at all?

We are bombarded by storytellers
every moment of every day.
We are told by politicians and pundits,
advertisements and celebrities,
who and what we should become.
Anxiety and distraction
are born of our teachers,
those at whose feet we sit.
We are taught
by the many storytellers in this world
how to think, live, and do.
The question, “At whose feet do you sit?”
is always the question
of a church seeking to be disciples of Jesus
informed by the Gospel
of God’s in-breaking Kingdom.

As the evil spectre of racism
has reared its ugly head
again this week
in our public square,
the church must ask itself,
as news and social media
seek to form us
into mindless reactionaries,
“At whose feet to we sit?”
Are we formed by the loud talking heads
and powerful politicians,
or are we formed by Jesus
the suffering Victim,
whose death and has reconciled us all?

Here, we gather at the feet of Jesus.
As we kneel to confess, 
Jesus teaches us to be humble and forgiving; 
as we hear the Scriptures read aloud, 
Jesus teaches us 
to listen for the Word of God 
that sustains this weary world; 
as we share in One Bread and One Cup, 
Jesus gives us a real vision of a church 
that shares all things in common, 
sustaining one another 
as each has need.

To sit at the feet of Jesus, 
to gather together in worship 
in the presence of the Triune God, 
is to receive a vision 
of a world made possible 
by the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom.

Here, Jesus is the primary storyteller. 
Jesus is the One 
who shapes our identity, 
the One who informs our vision 
of ministry in the world, 
the One who breaks the yoke of anxiety 
and bears the weight
of the Kingdom’s fulfillment
even as we are invited to participate.

This is the weight of worship for the church. To worship is to sit at the feet of Jesus and desire an alternative way of seeing and knowing the world. To hear the Gospel and receive the gifts of God free of charge every week is to inform a different way of life, a different way of being in the world. It is an imagination formed by the unbridled and undeserved love of God given each time we enter this space. Amen.