I've been way too much Martha this week, and not enough Mary.

It comes with the territory—new job, new town, busy family.

Going so hard at the beginning of work in an active church like this is expected. I know the staff has been pulling a lot of Martha days before I came, and now that I am here, too, so we can all get to know each other and get up to speed on everything.

We will find our rhythm soon. But I pray that such running to and fro all the time is not what you all want or need from us when we find our new normal.

Just a few weeks ago my days were very different. Time outside, time with animals, time with children. Walking out to the barn toward the sunrise, walking in from the night check of the horses under the stars. I was in sync with the weather. I knew what new birds were passing through our place. The finches and chickadees were busy. The baby barn swallows in our barn were getting stronger.

I could write a sermon or a book chapter from my front porch while I watched the red tail hawk make his rounds over our pastures. For me, such proximity to the pulse of animals, the sound of bird song, the firm ground under my feet was generative and life-giving. It was a direct plug in to my life-source—our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer.

And honestly, as clear as my call to Grace Covenant is, I make this transition back to an institutional-church-centered daily life with some trepidation. I don't want to be so much Martha—I don't want to lose the Mary moments of being quiet, of listening to the song of God’s creation and soaking it in with each breath.

It was a good week to reencounter Martha and Mary and to be reminded of the complexity of this text. It is often misused and misunderstood—because it fits so easily into the either/or ways we like to think about things.

Are you Mary or Martha? It’s almost always the question that goes with a preacher’s use of this text. The question often comes down to “are you worried about tidying up the kitchen and fussing about a meal more than you care about sitting silently at the feet of Jesus?” These questions are loaded with assumptions about gender. Loaded with caricatures and stereotypes.
For starters there is no mention of any kitchen or food that is the object of Martha’s distraction. That has been an easy assumption because of the principals in this story are two women. There is much scholarship out there telling us this passage is liberating from women, and scholarship telling us how oppressive it is for women.

This dissonance surfaces some complicated things not just about this particular text, but about the nature of scripture itself.

Scripture holds unique authority because of its Divine source. And scripture is knit through with human distortions—like patriarchy and abusive forms of power. And so texts like this one can be both oppressor and liberator depending on how we encounter them. Our encounter with scripture is fraught with sharp edges—that is why we need each other to sift through the rubble of violence and abusive power and the glimpses of God’s truth that wait for us to notice them.

The teenage me just wants something to hold onto, some thread of possibility that somehow my life is not ruined. Equipped with the language of sin that I heard every Sunday in church I construct a way to understand my life at 15. Being raped was my fault, it was my sin, and guilt and shame tell me to keep secrets—lots of them. The social justice machine that I had already learned to be at church is my answer to my shame. Do so much good for other people that somehow this horrible mess I caused will fade in importance.

No one can stop me if I just keep moving. From cross country practice to student council to youth group to volunteering at the nursing home to reading more articles about animal cruelty, to saving all my pennies to donate to the Humane Society, to getting straight As in school. My plan is airtight. “Strive for perfection,” 2 Corinthians 13:11 tells me. “Agree with one another, live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

I need the God of love and peace to be with me, I say to myself. So I strive for perfection. I sacrifice myself, my vitality, my well-being. I stay in an abusive relationship. I try not to rock the boat.

Back then the Martha-striving was what kept me alive. But it only fed my anxiety that somehow, I could never be good enough. Underneath the social justice machine I feared, was someone who was unlovable, unacceptable, beyond the pale.

If I stop striving, everything will fall apart, and I have to think about my pain, my fear that there is no way out of the hell I am living. The Martha in me, this passage tells my 15 year old self, was bad. So, in all the wrong places I try to be Mary. Accepting, nice, polite, dutiful Mary. The Bible tells me so.
“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things,” Jesus says.

Martha welcomes Jesus into her house; she’s busting her rear end to do the work demanded by what is probably an active house church ministry. A closer look at the Greek and the context tells us that the tasks Martha is busy with are very probably not the tasks of the kitchen, but the tasks of ministry—preaching, teaching, Eucharist, administration. Martha and Mary are leaders, ministers.

This Martha and Mary passage cannot be taken out of context. It follows the story of the Good Samaritan and mirrors it in many ways. We know from last week that Jesus says “doing” is good—Go and do likewise, Jesus says.

So, we know from the larger Gospel that Jesus is not against the doing that Martha is occupying herself with. Doing is good. And Jesus clearly said that not doing is a problem—remember the two men who walked on by the stranger in the ditch last week?

Martha is distracted by the tasks of ministry—overloaded, overwhelmed. Jesus names her worry and anxiety as the problem. Jesus knows just what she needs. She needs a healing dose of his blessed assurance.

Truth be told, I did need to step outside the institutional every day life of academy and church to grow into a more life-giving way of being myself. The dissonance of liberative and oppressive layers of Christian identity is still with me.

Years of practicing how to surrender to God’s presence, to trust Jesus’ tender love brought me to a place of ease with myself, with the way God made me, with the way Jesus calls me sometimes into the fray and sometimes into quiet, still moments. There is no either/or to where and how my soul is renewed in my life in Christ. He has taught me the fluidity of his presence across time and circumstance.

Whether I am in quiet or in a contested space of pain and even peril, I am accompanied by my Savior, my Shepherd.

I don’t want to go back to that striving, distracted place that I lived in for so long. It was a fearful place, a dangerous place.
Orlando happens, Nice happens, Dallas happens, Turkey happens, Sudan happens—and as Jesus followers we cannot and will not ignore the pain of the world. But to do this work together, to BE this work together, we must have the wisdom to know how to take good care of each other and our selves.

The church is place where we get our marching orders to be sure, but it is also a place where it is safe to lay down our burdens and say, “I’m tired.” Beloved community must feed our souls, not just demand our best effort.

Our life together will not be all Martha and no Mary, Grace Covenant, not on my watch! We must cleave to our Source. When we have a chance to refill our tanks from our Source of life, from our redeemer, from the gentle, courageous, loving, and transforming Christ—we must take a deep breath and soak in the tenderness of His love for us.

God made each and every one of us loveable at our core—and that can be the hardest thing for us to accept about ourselves, but it is part of the Gospel that must come alive in each of us and in our lives together if we are going to be able to ignite it in those we serve.

In our Amos passage, people are so distracted by their jobs, their accumulation of wealth, and, frankly, by their cheating that they have distanced themselves from God’s ways and God’s Word. Religion is not used to make them better people or to build a more just world, but to kid people into thinking everything is ok when everything is not ok.

God says to them, the truth of oppression and suffering will surface, and every life will hit a rough patch, that’s how life works. And when you need me, God says, you won’t know where or how to find me.

They will run to and fro and not know how to recognize me, God says.

We must stay connected to our Source.

It is the worry, the lack of trust in our Source that we must work to let go of. We can never lose sight of who it is we are working for. We are Jesus followers—and Jesus loves us into loving our complicated selves and this complicated world. Life in Christ is not either/or—it is both/and. We are all Mary AND Martha.
Sitting on the back porch in our home-for-the-time-being house in Montreat this week, I breathe in the night mountain air and feel the familiar peace of Christ wash over me. I realize anew that my work here is not about striving for perfection, it is about trusting God.

The next day, I go to the bedside of one of my new brothers in Christ, Dr. Donald Dossey. Donald is transitioning from this life. I enter the peaceful space of his home where his hospital bed is situated for a view of the trees, birds, and squirrels in his back yard. And I meet another new brother in Christ who is there to sing to Donald in this transition time.

I read scripture to Donald, who had been sleeping non-stop for three days. I finish reading and Donald smiles and in a barely audible whisper he says “Thanks be to God.”

Being there, being with, being here, we encounter countless blessed brushes with our Source that renew and refresh the love and life we have to share.

Earlier this week, I signed off on a hymn Jeff suggested for after the sermon. The tasks of ministry overwhelmed me that day; in my distraction I let it be. But after sitting with Donald, I’ve changed my mind about what song we need to sing together. Donald’s bedside we sang a song I know by heart—it’s a Source song that I’ve sung in times when I needed to know how close Christ is—in loneliness, in stress, in unknowns, in transitions, sitting vigil as life crosses over, and during labor with my children when new life was coming into its own.

My Shepherd Will Supply My Need washed over your brother Donald as he slowly makes his sacred transition. And we are here together for Divine purpose, in this time of transition. The most important thing we can do is to stay close to our Source, Our Shepherd. That is the song we need to sing to each other to remind us that far from fazed and distracted, if we put our trust in God, we are loved and connected.

Thanks be to God.