

**What the work is for
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 17, 2022,
The Rev. Katherine M. Bush**

When you walk into the Art Institute in Chicago, you are immediately pulled up the Grand Staircase toward the sky-lit atrium filled with art. Last spring, I spent a quiet Sunday morning there, having my own kind of church, sitting on a hard bench off to the side, watching individuals and families walk through the beautiful space. Like church, some were there of their own accord, some clearly walking through under some level of duty or duress. Though there was no music, nor port wine to drink, there were arches, and a gentle hush, and a sense of awe. I spent a long time in front of a series of sculptures made from architectural salvage called "Fragments and Futures" that seemed apropos of, well, just about everything. That's likely to show up in another sermon, another time. After some time spent contemplating the people, and the light, and the art, and the grandeur, I noticed the inscription on the wall: "The Woman's Board Grand Staircase."

The Woman's Board, I later learned after googling a bit, has supported the Art Institute for over seventy years, helping to welcome families, students, teachers, and many others into this place of beauty, especially those who might not otherwise have been welcomed. I don't know a single person on that board, but I knew then that someone, somewhere, in some way contributed to my having "church" that morning in a museum in Chicago. Care and attention had been given to the place and space in which I sat, quietly scribbling, and breathing slowly, and soaking up a collection of images and stories. These anonymous women were the Marthas to my Mary moment.

I like to imagine them, though, the unknown women on that board looking up from their fund-raising and letter-writing and event-planning, and catching a glimpse of the light touching the marble. Or maybe for a little while, one or two of them drifted from their desks and kitchens, and walked through the galleries to remember what all the work was for - maybe they watched as a child's face lit up seeing some new artwork. Maybe they saw the person who sat for so long in front of the one piece, and in that moment felt a sense of purpose and joy at what they helped create. This Woman's Board seems to me much like the named and unnamed women that Luke includes in chapter eight who traveled with Jesus and who "provided for them out of their resources," and, of course, like Martha who welcomed Jesus into her home.

To me, the critique of Martha implied in this story always hits hard. First of all, my Mary-moments like the one I described in the museum are rare; I'm much more often playing the part of Martha in the story. I spent a good part of yesterday scrambling to get ready for today. A last-minute call, a flurry of plans that needed to be made and re-made, a sermon to be written, emails and texts bouncing around, kids needing rides to soccer, all accompanied by that familiar chicken-with-her-head-cut-off feeling. And now this morning, people walking into this place looking for solace, or some hope, a little bit of quiet, maybe some music and a piece of bread.

I wonder now if the critique is not about the work, after all surely Jesus wanted to eat some dinner and he wasn't cooking it, but rather, that when Martha looks up from that work, she can't see what she's helping to create. Martha looks up and finds fault in her sister who is having a wondrous moment. Martha looks up from the stovetop or the flower-arranging, but she doesn't see that she has created a space where story-telling and teaching and learning can happen. She is worried and distracted, and that blinds her to why she is doing all the things she is doing. She has lost sight of what the work is for. When she cries out in frustration to Jesus, I wonder if we can hear his response in a different tone, a tone that is not critical, but one that invites her to see this beautiful moment that she has given them. Jesus is prone to remind people not to worry, to see the world unfolding miraculously right in front of them. He must want this for Martha too, don't you think?

And, of course, we hope that she can also be invited to set down the ladle or the plates and listen for a little while too. Or one hopes for Martha that she gets a turn away from the work, a chance for her turn to sit with Jesus after dinner while the guys wash up. Whether or not this equitable share of the housework follows, there is an invitation for each of us in this story. We are all invited to look up from our tasks, whatever the work that we are about might be, and see what we are part of - what we are creating through all of our efforts. The invitation to pause does not come because we are in the wrong for tending to necessary tasks, but to help us see that the tasks are in service of a more beautiful life for ourselves and for those in our company. And that we can drift from the kitchen into the conversation, or from the boardroom into the galleries, or from whatever place of scrambling we might find ourselves into a place where we can breathe more deeply and remember what the work is for.