This week has been unlike any other I’ve ever lived through. This week I’ve found myself wondering, what do times of crisis show us?

Controversial former University of Chicago economics professor Milton Friedman believed that “When [a] crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” I’ll repeat that. “When [a] crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”

I’m guessing that Martha and Mary already had a certain dynamic between them when Jesus arrived. Living together in the same household, they likely already had certain gifts and challenges in their relationship. It’s not a global pandemic, but perhaps it is a high pressure moment when this exciting, provocative teacher--the Messiah--accepts an invitation to join their household for dinner. In this moment the ideas they have about what is most important are on full display as is their conflict with each other.

I’ve heard the term “apocalypse” used a lot this week to describe what it feels like for so many of our community organizations and institutions to close all public gatherings. I’ve been saying it feels like something out of a movie--like one about the end of the world.

But then I’m reminded that “apocalypse” is actually a word that comes from Greek and means a moment of revealing. It’s a revealing perhaps of things that have already been present or forming but are now seen and understood in a new way. I do believe much will be revealed in the next few weeks as our area and our nation weather this pandemic and work together to slow it’s spread.

Certainly, we’re hoping for a revelation from scientists and public health experts about the spread and treatment of the COVID-19 virus. But I believe we can expect other revelations too: like a new way of seeing and understanding what’s most important to us.

Because of what’s important to me, I like to be very careful about the way I interpret this story of Martha and Mary. It’s a story that has been used to denigrate the work of the household--work historically delegated to women in many cultures.

Some hear Jesus’ rebuke of Martha as one more voice putting down the work of
hospitality and caregiving as unimportant. We hear that particular message loud and clear in an economy that often puts a low monetary value—if any value at all—on the work of all kinds of caregivers.

But economic justice is a main theme for the writer of the Gospel of Luke, who remembers Jesus teaching not “Blessed are the poor in spirit” but “Blessed are the poor” and “Woe to the rich.”

I think the Jesus who Luke remembers would appreciate all Martha’s caregiving efforts. Moreover, I think that Jesus would be very concerned about the plight of hourly workers, who feel they can’t afford to miss work even if they are sick and even if they are spreading a contagion.

I think Jesus would be concerned about the ways hoarding vital resources may keep some people from having what they need. I believe one of the things being revealed right now is how very much our literal, physical well-being is tied up in each other’s well-being.

I feel humbled and hopeful thinking about all the ways our community, our state, and our whole globe right now are taking steps to slow the spread of this virus so that we can protect the most vulnerable among us and keep from overwhelming emergency resources any one of us could need at any time. What’s being revealed to me is how very connected we really are to each other.

Mary and Martha too are connected to each other. In fact, in order for us to fully consider Jesus’ message here, I would invite us to see Martha and Mary less as two sisters for a moment and think of them as two potential parts of our own selves.

The work that Martha is doing is not unimportant. So, my guess is the problem lies with her focus—with what Martha thinks is important. I’m pulling this idea from the words of Jesus and the narrator who both call her “distracted.” I don’t think they mean she’s not paying attention to what she’s doing or that she’s bad at managing tasks or that she suffers from an attention deficit disorder or anything like that. I think they’re saying she’s distracted from what really matters.

I get distracted from what really matters too. I catch myself working too hard. When I stop and ask myself honestly why it’s usually more about trying to prove my own worth to myself, others, or God than it is about much anything else.

I know the truth. I know I can’t prove my worthiness. I know we are all loved by God and of invaluable worth. Even when we fail. Even when we meet critics. God thinks we are enough. We are enough just as we are.
I get distracted though. I forget about all that--what's really important. When I’m lucky though, there’s a Mary part of me that can't help but turn my face back toward Jesus. When I’m lucky there’s something that catches my breath and reveals to me once again where I want my focus to be. Focus may be a hard thing to keep in the next few weeks if our lives have changes significantly—if temporarily.

In the 1600s Paris, Carmelite monk Brother Lawrence wrote a timeless piece on spirituality called The Practice of the Presence of God. Brother Lawrence never became a priest or anyone of higher authority. He didn’t have the education or standing. He worked in the kitchen most of his life. The book is about peeling potatoes. It’s about seeing the work of peeling potatoes as the most absolutely beautiful gift he could give for the glory of God and his neighbor’s good.

Potatoes are absolutely beautiful if you pay close enough attention. In my opinion they can also be absolutely delicious. And the time it takes to peel them is a luxury I don’t always have the time or patience to really stop and enjoy. Feeding people is indeed a deep honor. What could be more important?

Brother Lawrence must have peeled potatoes in the presence of God the way my great-grandmother hummed whenever she did anything. To this day, if you are caught humming while washing dishes in my family of origin, you will be said to be keeping Grammy Herrold alive. She lived through the much deadlier 1918 flu epidemic. She lost a number of her younger siblings. She lived through the depression. But she hummed. All the time. Now I wonder, what was she thinking about?

Did she find a way to keep her focus on what was really important even through all the crises she went through? Did those crises maybe reveal what was most important to her? Was it possibly the presence of God she was paying attention to in the midst of peeling potatoes?

Wherever we find ourselves these next few weeks, I pray these days will reveal what is most important to us. I pray we will keep our focus there. I pray our focused attention will reveal the presence of God breaking into our lives in ordinary and not so ordinary moments. For there is no taking away that presence from us, as Jesus says of Mary, “She has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her.”

I pray these days will reveal to us the way the presence of God is with us whether we work or rest or play, whether we are healthy or sick, whether this time is a welcome relief or full of chaos and trial.

God is with us. We are loved. We are still connected, undeniably, to each other.

May it be so. Amen.