

“Mary and Martha”

Luke 10:38-42

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Growing up, I was kind of an odd kid. I loved church - which was a good thing since my family attended both morning and evening on Sundays, plus Wednesday night prayer meeting; this would be why I know all the verses to a lot of hymns! I especially loved Sunday School and always learned all the memory verses. The Bible fascinated me. I was interested in theology and was borrowing books from my pastor's library when I was still in junior high. I thought out sermons in my head. At age 11, I begged to be allowed to join the confirmation class instead of waiting another year or two which would have been usual. In that class, I quickly memorized the “five points of Calvinism,” which I can recite off to this day.

But as much as I loved church, I didn't quite *belong*: because in our church, women didn't study theology. They didn't preach or even read the scripture lessons or lead any other parts of worship services. They didn't take leadership roles, serve on boards, make decisions, or have anything to do with church finances. They certainly did not go to seminary and become pastors. A woman's place was mostly limited to the kitchen, the children's Sunday School, the choir, and women-only groups. Because, supposedly, this was what the Bible taught. Because Jesus called only men to be his disciples. Because women's gifts are different from men's and therefore so are our roles.

I guess what nobody realized is that when you teach people Bible stories, those stories have their own power to upend your expectations. The story of Mary and Martha was a

lifeline for me. In the midst of an environment geared to defining one particular kind of role for women, here was this story that affirmed a broader sense of what girls and women were allowed to be interested in.

Mary wanted to learn. She wanted to be there amongst Jesus' other disciples. Those other disciples were probably mostly men; they aren't highly visible in this story but it seems they travelled around with him and some of them would most likely have been present. That's where Mary wants to be, and although that definitely involves stepping outside her expected role, that is apparently perfectly ok with Jesus.

Of course, "sitting at Jesus' feet" might not be entirely a literal description of what she was doing at one particular time; sitting at someone's feet can be an expression that means being a disciple of a teacher or mentor. Thinking about it that way reinforces the sense I always had that Mary is an active seeker and disciple, not merely the example of quiet, passive spirituality our Sunday School lessons stressed. And as far as Jesus is concerned, she doesn't have to be interested in traditional housewifely duties. She is valued for who she is, and not for her ability to fit into that role.

Mary's story was very powerful for me; she was a role model for me even before I consciously realized it. She validated my sense of who I was.

Now as an adult in a very different sort of Christian community (for which I am tremendously grateful!), I still cherish Mary's story. It helped me to get here. But I have found that over the years that Martha has become important to me too. I still love to learn

(and teach). The Bible still fascinates me. Theology is my native language. Leadership in the church is my calling.

But I also love to feed people. Hospitality is important to me and I believe it's at the heart of the gospel. In that context as well as others, I think that attention to the details makes a difference. And at church as well as at home, I deeply value all those practical tasks (like cleaning and cooking and fixing things) that are often overlooked but so necessary. I'm also very aware of the frustration that arises when some people are only too willing to enjoy the results of other people's work and not so willing to pitch in themselves. So I have sometimes felt that perhaps Martha, who's portrayed as both fussy-busy and whiny, kind of gets a bad rap here. And I've wondered a bit what Jesus could have been thinking.

Surely he doesn't think that supper will appear by magic – and he and whoever else is along are undoubtedly staying for a meal. I'd like to think that in the (untold) next part of the story he rallies all the male disciples to help chop the vegetables and wash the dishes, but I'm not quite sure that's believable. It certainly sounds like Jesus is saying that what Martha is doing isn't important, but can that really be what's going on?

For one thing, that just doesn't sound like Jesus. His actions and his stories suggest that he values the different kinds of work people do. His followers will go on to affirm that a faith community is made strong when we all use our own different gifts. It's also worth noting that in Luke's gospel, what comes *right* before this is a story Jesus told about a good Samaritan and his readiness to take care of a hurting man – a story that's all about service.

Moreover, Jesus is – they all are – part of a culture in which hospitality is a paramount virtue. Welcoming guests – even strangers – is a necessity for a healthy society; you are supposed to remember that you too have been or may yet be a stranger, and to give the welcome that you would want. It's also an expression of faith and faithfulness; when you welcome another person, that's like welcoming God. Jesus doesn't say any of that here (though you'll probably remember that he does say it in other contexts), but he doesn't have to say it. In the culture he shares with Martha, it's a given. So it's extremely unlikely that Jesus intends to denigrate or trivialize service or "women's work" or "practical" tasks in contrast to more "spiritual" or "important" pursuits.

It may be that such a perception doesn't come from the text but rather has been "read into" it: we read that Martha was distracted by her many tasks. Some translations say that she was distracted or "cumbered" with "much serving." We can imagine how that could happen; we can see how that's a problem. Most of us have probably been there. So it seems natural to go along in that line of thinking, picture Martha as a stereotypical fussy hostess who forgets to take the time to listen to Jesus. But what we can't see in English is the Greek word διακονια (from which we get "deaconate") - more typically in the New Testament translated "ministry" (as for example, when the apostle Paul talks about his own work). What Martha is doing shines in a completely different light when it's not "tasks" or "much serving" but *ministry*.

The text doesn't dismiss or trivialize what Martha is doing. And the verse that says Mary has made the better choice? In Greek, it's kind of ambiguous. It might mean better. But it

might just mean that Mary has made a “good” choice – which is rather a different thing and allows the possibility that there might be other good choices too.

So what’s really going on here?

This story might not be after all so much about a conflict before dinner between two sisters over chores. It might not even be about how important it is to spend time listening to Jesus rather than get lost in busyness and petty details. It might reflect a broader difference in perspectives about what it means to be faithful. One New Testament scholar even suggests that Mary might have been one of the women disciples who traveled with Jesus as he preached and taught in various towns, while Martha did what we might think of as “deacon” ministry close to home.

So what we see here could be that familiar tension we often recognize between practical service and spiritual nurture, between two different ways of living the life of faith. You know what I mean: the mission/service/social justice Christians don’t really “get” the worship/prayer/fellowship Christians, and vice versa. That tension is often a distraction that keeps us from really being the church that Jesus calls us to be.

Not everyone has the same gifts, the same passions, the same calling. Not only that: there may be times when what I need and what is needed from me is action – service, activism, organizing things and getting people involved; and there may be other times when what is right is prayer, learning, contemplation, and personal connection.

For most of us, what's more usual is that our lives are a mix of both. Sometimes that means a nice healthy balance. Sometimes we end up resentful about what someone else is or isn't doing; sometimes we take for granted the practical or the spiritual gifts of the people around us.

Maybe Jesus' response to Martha has nothing to do with which way is "better," but just simply with the fact that it's problematic to judge the actions or inaction of other people through the lens of our own personality, or our own present "moment." Maybe that's the "distraction" Jesus has in mind. It's serious, because it distracts us from supporting one another's gifts. It distracts us from the ability to appreciate how much healthier our faith would be if we cultivated *both* action and contemplation, both service and spirituality. It distracts from community. It distracts from the *main thing*: the good news of the gospel that offers freedom and wholeness ...to all of us.

So maybe it's a mistake to glean from this story that we have to choose whether to be like Mary or like Martha. Nobody is – or should be – defined by one moment in her life, by one story, one role. There is more to both Mary and Martha than this story. We know that Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus were all close friends of Jesus – John's gospel tells us that Jesus loved them – but we don't know anything about how that friendship developed. There's the story of Lazarus's death, where Mary and Martha each - separately expressed confidence in Jesus' power to heal and even raise the dead. Mary is identified as one of the women who anointed Jesus. Some people think that both the sisters were among the women who came to Jesus' tomb on the first Easter morning.

There are other stories about these sisters beyond the Bible too. I came across a scholar who believes that Mary of Bethany to be the same Mary described in some early Christian writings as a missionary who preached to and baptized women. Others believe she was a leader in the church in Jerusalem. The stories about Martha are even more interesting: A medieval legend says that Martha saved a village from a dragon, not by killing it, like St. George was said to have done with the beast he encountered, but *taming* it by sprinkling it with holy water. (This legend was most known in France, which might explain why the first edition of *The Joy of Cooking* has a picture of St. Martha and the dragon on the cover, I guess in homage to her supposed kitchen skills!) I don't know what is behind those tradition but they give us an idea of how powerfully the story of these sisters has spoken to people over the years.

You know, there are quite a lot of churches and other Christian groups and organizations named in honor of Mary and Martha – named not for one or the other, but for *both* of them, I mean. Maybe that reflects a shared, if unconscious, understanding that we really aren't meant to choose between them, that we need *both* their examples of faithful discipleship. Mary and Martha are sisters, and they belong together, as do we all, whatever our gifts, whatever our calling.

Amen.

Resources:

“Sermon on Mary and Martha” Nadia Bolz Weber

“Mary of Bethany: her leadership uncovered” Mary Stromer Hanson
Luke (Interpretation Commentary) Fred B. Craddock