

“The Better Part”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
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Luke 10:38-42

Mary and Martha. A simple story of two sisters. How many people here identify with Martha? What about Mary? Are there any Mary’s here?

I think it’s easy for those of us who identify with Martha to start feeling a little defensive whenever we hear this story. After all, Martha was the responsible one. She made sure everyone was fed and cared for. She was working hard to provide hospitality to guests in her home. Without her, no one would have eaten. Martha was a doer. She knew how to take care of business, how to get things done. If you wanted an event planned, I’m guessing it was a good idea to call on Martha. And really, isn’t doing more important than being? Surely it must be preferable to be productive than to just sit around.

No offense to the Marys in the room, but what was Mary doing? Sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening? That seems a little lazy. First of all, that wasn’t even a place where a woman was supposed to be. And then, she was leaving all the work for her sister to do. No wonder Martha felt resentful. Maybe she would have liked to have sat and listened, too. But that’s something you can do after all the work is done. Once you’ve straightened the house and cooked and served everyone and cleaned up, then maybe there’s time to sit at the feet of Jesus.

If Mary had helped Martha, then the work would have gone faster and maybe both of them could have sat and listened. If Martha had done what Mary did, then no one would have had dinner. How well do you think that would have gone over? It's not like Martha could just order pizza from Domino's or pick up a tray of Chick-fil-a nuggets.

So why does Jesus criticize Martha and praise Mary? Can't he appreciate all the work Martha had done on his behalf? We know that Jesus is a fan of serving others. This story comes right after the parable of the Good Samaritan. As we heard last week, in the parable Jesus seems to indicate that the good neighbor is the Samaritan who stops and looks after the wounded man. If the Samaritan had been lost in contemplation, he certainly wouldn't have stopped to help. It was the action he took that made him the good neighbor. Jesus tells us to go and do likewise. So which is it? Are we supposed to be responsible and take care of others or are we supposed to sit and listen?

Traditionally this story has been interpreted to mean that we need both the contemplative and the active in our lives. Teresa of Avila writes, "Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have Him always present and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat. How would Mary, always seated at His feet, provide Him with food if her sister did not help her?" She also says, "let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have this strength to serve."

Martha and Mary must join together. Loving our neighbor in our hearts without the action of our hands doesn't do much to put food in the bellies of our neighbors or clothes on their backs. On the other hand, without spending time listening to Jesus, like Mary, our activity can become relentless and draining, ungrounded in our spiritual lives. We may become exhausted and resentful, giving of ourselves until we drop, but angry and frustrated by our work. I think it is this resentment, the worry and distraction, that Jesus is actually pointing out as problematic, not Martha's willingness to serve others.

As part of my seminary training I did a unit of CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, in which we learned about how to be chaplains. Every morning we interns led a short worship service and once a week each of us had to give a homily. One day I used this story of Mary and Martha as my text. I made similar points as those I'm making here, and I basically concluded that this story is about finding a balance in our spiritual lives. I felt pretty confident of what I had said and even proud of the fact that no less a saint than Teresa of Avila agreed with my conclusions.

My supervisor turned to me in our reflection group afterwards and said, "Well, yes, that is a classic interpretation of the text. But why do you think Jesus said that Mary has chosen the better part?"

I was stunned. I've been thinking about his question ever since. I still think that Mary and Martha must be joined together and that the life of prayer must feed the life of service and vice versa. And I definitely want Jesus to praise the Marthas for all their frantic activity, even when it causes them to

be worried and distracted, instead of serving with a spirit of joy. I want Martha to get the pat on the back that she deserves. But like my CPE supervisor noted, I am missing the point.

It is by stopping and listening to the Word of God that we learn what service we are called to do. Mary took her place at the feet of Jesus and listened. She claimed a place that women normally couldn't be. She had the courage to remain there even when her own sister threw it up in her face that she wasn't being productive enough, wasn't helping her sister as she should have been. We don't know from the story what fruit was born from Mary's listening. Maybe she felt called into some sort of service that gave her joy. Maybe she learned from Jesus how she might spread the gospel. Maybe she didn't DO anything but instead BECAME something new.

Mary isn't the only one in the story who stops and is still. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is marching toward his death. And yet, he makes time to stop for a visit with his friends. If anyone should have been worried and distracted, you would think it would be Jesus. He was on his way to the cross. One commentator says, "Even amid the hustle and bustle of fulfilling one's mission, Jesus seems to say, there is still nothing more important than to live in the "eternal now" of one's relationship with God."¹

¹ David Lose, "Mary, Martha, and my Dad" in "Dear Working Preacher," 7-11-10 at [workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=374.

This is a spirituality that we can practice in the kitchen or in the study, at school or at play, while working the farm or looking for work. “What matters is not so much what you are doing, but the attentiveness to God's presence and purpose in all our varied activities and responsibilities.”

Why did Jesus say that Mary chose the better part? Because Jesus was in the house. And when Jesus is in the house, the focus shouldn't be on worry and distraction; the focus should be on him. Sisters and Brothers, Jesus is in the house. Are you listening?