

It's Not Either/Or

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text: Luke 10: 38-42 **38** Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. **39** She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. **40** But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." **41** But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; **42** there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

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I keep a recipe journal, the way some folks keep a diary. For Thanksgiving 2004, my notes say that we had eight people over, a 13 pound free range turkey which I brined overnight and baked at 350 for 3 ½ hours, stuffed with an orange, celery, onion and carrot. The stuffing was cornbread and chestnut and I made mashed potatoes, cranberry relish, apple crisp, and chocolate pecan pie. I noted that it would have been good to have a smaller bird, and to have more clearly specified the time for appetizers.

I don't remember who was at the dinner table, or whether any of us had a good time.

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Now, we could bemoan the dangers of being too much of a Martha. But I think this morning's passage is more nuanced than we often recognize. Despite the way the NRSV translates some key words in our text, I don't think Luke is telling us that Marthas and Marys are entirely separate kinds of people; nor do I think Jesus preaches Mary's way of

learning over Martha's way of sharing. In this moment, the better part, the main course, the good choice (all ways of translating the word *agathos* in verse 42) is to sit, listen, and learn from Jesus. But every Bible passage has a context.

Luke tells us the story of Martha and Mary in between the parable of the Good Samaritan, and Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray to God. (There's my whole sermon: Good Samaritan, Mary and Martha; How to Pray. Part of one narrative of wholistic Christian formation. Got the point? Good, I can sit down.)

Jesus lifts up the Good Samaritan as a model because of his compassionate action. He shares with someone in need, and redefines neighbor. Jesus says, *Go and do likewise*. In the passage after Mary and Martha, the disciples want to learn from their teacher, so he offers them a way to connect with God in prayer. If you read only these five verses (Luke 10:38-42), it is easy to hear a hierarchy of the life of contemplation over the life of service. But when you look at the broader narrative in Luke, you see that in the Christian story, there are moments to act and moments to reflect, and these moments feed each other. We need to live in the balance of both; we don't live by bread alone – but without bread we can't live. Perhaps what Jesus is getting at in this passage, is that Martha needs to tweak how she discerns which kind of moment she's in.

If Jesus shows up at your house, turn the stove off and sit down with him. Let him turn the water into wine, give him the two loaves and five fish. You want to remember this meal. You want to be in this moment. There is nothing more important – there is nothing that will feed your soul more than sitting down to listen. There is nothing that will strengthen you more, for all you do, than connecting with Jesus. And if you find, in 2022, that Jesus does not often show up in your living room, set aside time to seek him out.

Martha's problem is not her service, but her resentment. Framed another way, maybe the issue for Martha is that her many, important tasks leave her no ability in this moment to *be* with Jesus.

But I still don't want to dismiss what Martha was *doing* as unimportant.

Her tasks - the Greek word here is *diakonia*...the word from which our word deacon developed. In the Biblical context this word could have meant someone who performed "table ministry" – prepared a meal or communion; or someone who preached; or someone who administered, or someone who provided financial support. (Holly Hearon, in Interpretation: Luke 10:38-42)

We also know from the phrase, "Martha welcomed him into her home" that Martha was the head of the household, the host, possibly the leader of a "house church" of Jesus' followers. (from scholars including Mary Rose D'Angelo and Holly Hearon) When *Jesus needed* a place to rest, Martha provided it by opening her home to him.

Here's something else about Martha, and this for me is good news to highlight after this morning's passage. If we wonder, does Martha ever take the opportunity to sit and breathe and think about Jesus' words and power, John chapter 11 makes it clear that she does. In John 11, her brother Lazarus is sick and she and Mary ask Jesus to come to him. He arrives after Lazarus dies. Martha is distraught, but Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe it? Martha replies, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is Peter who first testifies that Jesus is Lord. In the Gospel of John, it is Martha who makes that testimony first. And afterward, Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb.

Mary has a good story, too.

She is not just a mystic, a dreamer, a passive listener. She does very little in the story Luke tells, but in John, it is Mary who anoints Jesus before his arrest. The story is told in different ways in the four Gospels, but John names *this* Mary as the one who anoints Jesus. When Jesus needs the loving care of a friend, Mary anoints him and wipes his feet with her hair.

Mary listens to Jesus. When he preaches the Word in her home, she sits at his feet and listens. In that moment, there is only one thing needed. Mary chooses the better part. But a moment comes for her to offer her own kind of hospitality, and kindness, a moment to act. And in that moment, she offers Jesus a gift of remarkable poignancy.

Here is another thing we know about Martha and Mary. Jesus loved them. When their brother Lazarus died, Jesus wept with them.

By the end of the Gospels, Mary and Martha have both taken the opportunity to listen, to connect, to be loved by Jesus. By the end of the Gospels, Mary and Martha have both been fed enough to give that love back. Here's the lesson for us, I think:

If we are not grounded in, saturated by, wrapped up inside the love of God, how can we love our neighbors the way God asks us to?

If Jesus knocks on your door, turn off the stove, and sit down at his feet. And if he doesn't knock - open the door and invite him in anyway.

Let us pray.

God of Martha and Mary,

Increase our desire to receive your love, and our desire to offer your love to our neighbors. May we mirror your own loving. Amen.