

“Stop and Listen”

Luke 10:38-42

You’ve no doubt heard the contrast made between Martha and Mary.
Martha is too busy.

She is uptight and stressed out about her work.

She’s a basket-case, a nervous wreck running herself ragged.

Martha’s display of emotions makes her look insecure and shallow.

Clearly, her priorities are all out of order.

Mary, on the other hand, is calm and focussed.

Her serene frame reveals a depth of spirit.

Mary sits and ponders every word that falls from Jesus’ lips.

“Let the world do what it will, I will sit with my Lord and listen to him.”

Mary has found what matters in life, and she clings to it,
the one needful thing.

Martha and Mary. A bad example. A good example.

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Or is that fair? What has Martha done wrong?

The beginning of this story is the perfect picture of hospitality.

And after all, earlier in Luke, when Jesus sends out the 70 disciples

he tells them to live off of the generosity of the villages where they go.

Clearly, Jesus and his disciples need a meal and a place to sleep.

Martha, by showing hospitality, should be in line for Jesus’ blessing
not his rebuke.

What’s more, it was Jesus who just told the story about the Good Samaritan.

Don’t be like the priest and the Levite who are too preoccupied with religion
to be of any help to a person in need.

Instead, be like the Samaritan, and go help your neighbor!

By every decent standard of the day, and by Jesus’ own instruction,
it was Martha’s responsibility to receive Jesus and his disciples
and take care of their needs.

Where would we be without Martha?

Without people who are able to see the work that needs to be done
and then be willing to do it?

Where would the American experiment in democracy be
without diligence and hard work?

Where would be our society’s advances
in technology, medicine, transportation, communication?

What about the Church? How could the mission of Christ be carried on today
without laborers in the vineyard?

If the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few,
how can we be critical of Martha who steps up and enlists for service.

How will the gospel be proclaimed, and divine worship maintained.
How will the sick and grieving be cared for, the needs of the community
be met?
How will the world hear and be transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ
without a whole host of Marthas?

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The Presbyterian Church (not to mention much of our nation)
has been built on a strong Calvinist Work Ethic.
So, we might ask what a work-a-holic like the great reformer John Calvin
might have said about this story of Martha and Mary and Jesus.

As you might expect, Calvin doesn't go for a simple caricature
of these two women – one good, one bad.
He gives credit to Martha. In his commentary on this passage, he writes,
“...we know that [people] were created to busy themselves with labor
and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God
than when each one attends to his calling
and studies to live well for the common good.”

He goes on to say that anyone
“who wishes to advance in Christ's school should...
make use of what he has learned.
There is a time for hearing and a time for doing.”

So this encounter between Jesus and Martha and Mary
turns out not to be as simple as we might like it to be.

This is one of those “NOW...BUT...” stories.
NOW as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village...
...where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home
...and her sister Mary sat at his feet and listened.

In the first two verses, nothing has really gone wrong.
Martha and Mary have made their choices.

Then comes the BUT.

BUT Martha was distracted by her many tasks.
The work Martha is doing is not bad in and of itself.
But something has gone wrong with Martha,
and she has become distracted.

Calvin says that
Martha goes too far and is too extravagant,
whereas Christ preferred frugality.
She is busy with unnecessary tasks,
when compared with the value of the presence of Christ.
(Martha might have disagreed with Calvin about which tasks were
“unnecessary and extravagant”)

Still, Jesus is quite clear in his rebuke of Martha and his approval of Mary.

*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;
there is need of only one thing.*

*Mary has chosen the better part,
which will not be taken away from her.*

We don't know if Mary is a hard worker.

What we do know is that, at this moment, she has stopped to listen to Jesus.

Perhaps she believes

that Jesus is the source of whatever good she hopes to do in the world.
that if she leaves no room for Jesus, she cuts herself off from true life.

Maybe she fears that her own sense of what is right might be distorted,
misdirected, clouded by her own self-interest,

and she wants to be guided instead by the wisdom of her Lord.

Or maybe Jesus' words have powerfully touched her life before,
and she cannot help but stop...and listen.

Whatever the reason, Jesus praises Mary.

She has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

Contrary to the practice of the rabbis of his day,

Jesus welcomes Mary – a woman – to sit at his feet,
to become his disciple.

He would no doubt welcome Martha, too,

if she would stop her work for a while, and listen.

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Being Jesus disciple has everything to do with making choices.

Being Jesus' disciple calls for discernment in every new situation.

Where is Jesus leading now? What is Jesus saying? What am I to do now?

Is it time to work or time to rest? Time to speak or time to listen?

We cannot too simply dismiss Martha, or embrace Mary.

“If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether,
and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever.”ⁱ

Sometimes we need to hear the story of the Good Samaritan.

Sometimes we need to hear Jesus rebuking Martha, praising Mary.

One preacher has said,

“If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary,
his answer would probably be “Yes”.”ⁱⁱ

Sometimes we are Martha:

busy people, frazzled and fragmented,
distracted and worried by many things,
but working earnestly to do work that needs to be done.

Other times, we are Mary:

feeling a deep longing to be connected to something beyond
this mundane world.

We yearn to receive wisdom,
to know the truth about ourselves and about God.
We want to live in peace, undisturbed by the pressures of life.
yet we have people who depend on our work
children and grandchildren
aging parents and grandparents
the church needs our service, the community needs our effort.

So we live with this tension
between contemplation and action
between study and service
between listening and doing.
We live with this tension because we follow the One who taught that
the love of God is expressed in the love of the neighbor,
and we serve God by serving the neighbor.

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As a pastor, I often find myself running around like Martha,
distracted by my many tasks.
One day, a few years ago,
I was visiting a church member at the University of Virginia hospital.
I had been spending a lot of time in the hospital that week.
As I was leaving the hospital, on my way to the elevator,
I walked by several rooms, all of which were occupied,
most of them by two people, all suffering from some sickness or disease.

As I got on the elevator that day,
the doors closed and I pushed the button to the ground floor.
For some reason,
I was struck by the reality of what each of those buttons on the elevator
stands for.
Any one of those elevator buttons
would have taken me to a floor of the hospital
where I could have walked past several dozen rooms,
each with a person, or a pair of persons, each suffering
from some illness.
Each of those buttons represented a floor full of human need.
And the Martha in me was overwhelmed by the immensity of suffering
in that place.

As the elevator door opened and I walked out into the hall
I noticed a little sign by one of the doors in the hallway.
It was the door to the Chapel.
Now I knew that I had an hour's drive back to the church,
and many tasks to be done.
Even so, I found myself turning in.
The Mary in me longed for just a moment of quiet.

The little chapel was empty.
The chairs were arranged to face the stained glass window at the front.
I noticed a couple of chairs pulled out of position to face one another.
 A box of tissues sitting on one of them.
I sat down in the back.

At the front of the room, just under the stained glass window was a table.
And as I sat there in solitude, my mind was drawn to our Lord's words
 at the Last Supper...
 "I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when
 I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."
And I began to envision the grand banquet table in the kingdom of our Lord,
 and all those who have suffered in this life, sitting around it,
 feasting with Christ,
 laughing with him,
 healthy, happy, whole.

I sat for a few moments with my eyes closed and savored the image.
When at last I rose and left the Chapel,
 I left with an assurance I had been missing before;
 a Word from God
 which gave me strength and sent me off to share that strength
 with others who need it.

I made a choice.
I stopped to listen to God, and God made me more alive.
 What Jesus gave me that day,
 will never be taken away.

Amen.

ⁱ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p. 152.

ⁱⁱ Craddock, p. 152.