

To Serve or Not to Serve – Is that the Question?

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Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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.' But the Lord answered her, '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.'

I think that most of us are familiar with the story of Martha and Mary and I'm going to bet that for many of us, we have an immediate reaction – one that either draws us to Martha or Mary.

I want you to try to remember the first time you heard this story, or if today is the first time you heard this story – who do you tend to side with? Are you a Martha? Or a Mary?

Anyone care to share why?

- Marthas – how I serve (my work) is criticized and unappreciated
- Marys – how I serve (my spiritual contemplation) is criticized and questioned

Typically, preachers approach this story in reference to the scriptures that have immediately preceded this....

- Luke chapter 10 begins with Jesus' commission of the 70 – 35 pairs of disciples sent before him to share the good news. He advises them that they are at the mercy of those to whom they encounter. He teaches them about hospitality. People are either going to welcome you and demonstrate loving hospitality or they won't. Woe to those who aren't hospitable.
- Then we have a story where a lawyer asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life. Jesus confirms his understanding that it requires one to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your strength, and your mind; and also to love your neighbor as yourself."

Hospitality. Loving God. Loving your Neighbor.

- So, then we have the parable of the Good Samaritan. A story about HOW to love your neighbor.
- Then we have the story of Martha and Mary. A story about HOW to love God.

“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.”

The story of Martha and Mary then supposedly teaches us that “to love the Lord with all one’s heart, soul, strength and mind entails sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to his word, (Gench, 57) versus being distracted by the work of welcoming and serving others.

Sound familiar? Have you heard that sermon before?

So, if that’s what we’re supposed to take away - “Martha’s got it wrong because she’s distracted by the hospitality of serving and working,” how does that sit with Jesus’ commissioning the 70 disciples and judging those towns and homes that do not show hospitality to them?

Discipleship is hospitality.

And...discipleship is spiritual contemplation.

Are we getting a mixed message from the story of Martha and Mary?

From Back to the Well, our spring study, this mixed message is especially prevalent when the story is more closely examined and critiqued from a feminist perspective. In the book, Sharon Ringe talks about this ambiguity saying,

Martha, who welcomes Jesus and expends considerable energy in providing hospitality for him and those traveling with him, is called “distracted” and “worried.” She is blamed for doing what she would have been expected to do in her society. Furthermore, she is portrayed as whining to the man Jesus about her sister’s failure to help her, instead of resolving the matter herself, woman to woman. Instead of receiving a blessing as someone who welcomes Jesus and his followers, she receives a scolding.

Mary fares no better. She gets to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to his teaching, just as the male disciples do and she is praised by Jesus for it. But she is a silent learner. She poses no questions to Jesus, and she does not interact with him as ... male disciples do. Unlike male disciples who are described as learning from Jesus, and who then are charged to carry the message on to others, Mary gets no commission to preach, no speaking part whatsoever. Whatever may have been Jesus’ relationship with women followers, Luke

allots them carefully circumscribed roles. For them the lifestyle of discipleship – at least in Luke’s church - promises few real changes.”¹

As a woman in Luke’s community, a patriarchal perspective leaves you no better off regardless of which choice you make - a Martha, choosing hospitality as your discipleship service, or a Mary, choosing to listen and learn at the feet of your rabbi as your discipleship service.

In the story of Martha and Mary, there are many questions that arise as we delve into their lives. We have an extremely limited context, only five verses from which we can learn of their personalities, as well as their chosen forms of discipleship.

What do we know of these women?

If this Mary and Martha are the same as in John verses 11 and 12, they have a brother Lazarus who lives with them. Either way, it still says that this is Martha’s home, to where Jesus has come. So, we have a woman of means, a home-owner inviting Jesus into her home. This shouldn’t be too surprising because we know that many of Jesus’ early supporters and benefactors were women; women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna who provided for him and his disciples out of their resources.

Again, if they were the same Martha and Mary from the Gospel of John, these women likely were familiar with Jesus. This story in Luke, at this specific chronological moment, we may not be sure as to how well they knew him, but they’re certainly not complete strangers. So, we can assume that they have some familiarity with his teaching. As first-century Jewish women, women of means and being familiar with Jesus, Martha and Mary would have understood the importance of hospitality.

We have no details on the exact number of people present in Martha’s home, but based on scripture referring to Martha’s “many tasks,” we can safely assume that there were quite a few people there, requiring much work to properly welcome them into her home. We know that Martha chose to focus on providing hospitality to all that entered her home, while Mary chose to be one of the pupils – leaving Martha to handle all of the tasks of hospitality.

When Martha speaks up to Jesus, pointing out the factual disparity in responsibilities between she and her sister and her feeling unappreciated, Jesus tells her she is distracted by many things and should focus on only one, which Mary has done – and that’s better.

¹ Shareon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 161-62.

We hear Jesus scolding Martha. It's easy to understand how, for so long, interpretations of this story have led to characterizing Martha "as a fussy, nagging, argumentative, legalistic busybody – in contrast to her tranquil, attentive, contemplative sister" (Gench, 73).

I hope you agree with me that while this may be a knee-jerk interpretation of who Martha is, we owe it to Martha, ourselves and all the Marthas in the world to reject undermining her choice on how to serve.

Listen to Jesus and remember that while he says Mary has chosen the better part, he does not say that Martha's choice is wrong.

Is one right and the other wrong? No. How can serving Jesus be wrong? It's not a matter of to serve or not to serve, but rather a matter of balance and timing. "Duty and devotion are both necessary but there must be a balance. A balance where neither one would hinder us from exhibiting the other. Everything we do and every relationship we have demands focus. When we focus properly, we succeed. When we lose our focus, we begin to fail, and the longer we go without focus, the worse our circumstances get."² It is not wrong, or less-than, or **not loving God properly** for Martha to choose to disciple as she does. Jesus' scolding, draws attention to HOW she goes about it.

In Back to the Well, author Blake Heffner notes that with Martha and Mary, "everything hinges...on the significance of the moment. Christ does not praise Mary for her contemplative life but rather for her knowledge of the time. Likewise, he does not reprove Martha for her active hospitality; rather, it is her concern for peripheral matters that is awry. When the Lord comes to one's house declaring the in-breaking of the kingdom, then it is time to drop everything and be attentive" (Gench, 74).

This is a story of two women, sisters, partners, demonstrating two choices on how to love God. It can and has been argued by scholars and interpreters that the purpose in this story isn't to necessarily focus on Martha and Mary as women or necessarily as siblings either, but as disciples. Disciples in partnership who extend and receive hospitality, balancing action and contemplation, all for the purpose of loving God. Regardless of gender or family relation, disciples must always be cautious of becoming distracted by anything that dominates and shifts the focus away from Jesus and his teachings; love God and love each other.

As we continually learn from scripture, and especially in the last couple of weeks as we dig deeper into the relationships Jesus had with women in the gospels, these stories – historical or otherwise – provide material for us to question, discuss, debate and perhaps even argue what it is that God wants us to hear. As we dissect the story, the people and the language, we discover

² Bruce Ball, *A Loss of Focus*, March 6, 2009. www.sermoncentral.com. Accessed March 22, 2019.

that there are probably more unanswered questions than we ever previously considered. What is it that we can learn? What is the good news that we take away from this story?

- Service – service to others is good, always good. It is the model of Christian leadership and the very definition of Jesus's own ministry.
- To love God is to listen. It is imperative that we take the time to hear God's unconditional, gracious and merciful love and then do likewise.

Martha's doing and Mary's hearing aren't set against each other as a bad vs. good or wrong vs. right dichotomies. They're choices support and complement each other. They are in balance with each other.

To serve, one must listen to the Lord. To listen to the Lord, is to learn how to serve.

AMEN