

The Gifts of Mary and Martha

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Luke 10: 38-42

Well, there it is. Did you hear it? It's right there in Scripture, right there in Luke – the Biblical mandate to avoid housework! The story goes like this. Jesus arrived at the home of Mary and Martha, and Martha, ever the hostess, was frantically trying to make everything perfect for the guests. Mary, on the other hand, parked herself at the feet of Jesus, oblivious to anything but his words. Now Martha could take only so much of this, so she asked Jesus, quite politely, I'm sure, to tell her lazy sister to get up and help. To which Jesus replied, "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 from her."

Those words have made many a woman seminarian, at least in my generation, rejoice. Because you see, in that one little interaction in Martha and Mary's home, Jesus contradicted, one might say corrected, all the cultural norms of his day about the appropriate role for women. By validating Mary's choice to sit at his feet and be a student, Jesus challenged the custom that only men could learn. By

telling Martha that hearing his words was more important than housework, that Mary had “chosen the better part,” Jesus was inviting Martha to come out of the kitchen, too.

But I think there may be more here than meets the eye. I think the interactions between Jesus and these sisters, recorded only in the Gospels of Luke and John, are more complex than they may appear to be. I will admit that part of what pushes me to explore this passage a little more deeply is the fact that while clearly Luke holds Mary up as the model of faith, I really like Martha better.

In both Luke and in the account of Martha and Mary at the raising of their brother Lazarus in the Gospel of John, Martha is the most interesting character. She just puts it right out there, says what she’s thinking, even to Jesus. Some might call Martha bossy – I like to think of her as assertive. While Mary is the more contemplative sister, Martha has her feet firmly planted on the ground. When Jesus and the crowd that followed him came to their home, Martha knew that they needed to be fed, the table had to be set, more chairs had to be found, the chickens had to be shooed out of the living room – there was work to be done. In John’s Gospel, it was Martha who rushed out to meet Jesus, as he came to them after the death of

Lazarus and it was she who first proclaimed, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But even as she proclaimed Jesus the Messiah, it was practical Martha, as Jesus ordered the stone in front of Lazarus’s tomb moved away, who reminded Jesus, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” You can almost hear her say, “Lord, are you sure you want to do this?” Martha is not afraid to take a stand, to question authority, to question even Jesus, to act on her beliefs and to try to convince others to do the same.

What I find particularly interesting about the juxtaposition of Martha and Mary is that clearly, the gospel writers preferred Mary. It was she, not her more outspoken sister, who was held up as the model of faith. As a disciple, it was Mary who was the more open to learning, who listened most closely, who was not “distracted by many things,” but rather understood what was most important in the short time they had with Jesus. And if Mary was sometimes willing to put aside her day-to-day tasks to focus on the Kingdom of Heaven, well the tasks could most likely wait for another time.

Mary may have been the model of faith, but it is Martha who gets all the good lines in the story. It is Martha’s interactions with

Jesus that are recorded, perhaps because they were as important in their way as Mary's thoughtful contemplation. Martha paid attention to the needs of those around her, from the physical needs of guests in her home to her support of her sister as they both mourned the brother they loved. If Martha was occasionally too distracted by the immediate needs to see the bigger picture, her distraction rose out of her compassion and need to act.

I believe that we live in a world that needs the gifts of both Martha and Mary. The problems that face us will not be solved by reflection without action, no matter how thoughtful. Nor will they be resolved by action that is not grounded in thoughtful analysis. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

When Leota came in to the Shelter at the Women's Resource Center, she was exhausted. She came into the shelter in the middle of the night after a visit to emergency room for stitches in her head where her husband had hit her during a fight. She had little in her bag except the medication she needed for her migraines. There were dark circles under her eyes and several of her teeth were missing. As we talked, Leota squirmed in the chair, trying to find a comfortable position, "I have a bad back," she explained. Leota was thin, almost

painfully so, and was dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and flip-flops, despite the 30 degree temperature outside. “Is there somewhere here I could wash out my clothes?” she asked, “I’ve had them on for several days.” I assured her that we could give her a change of clothes and something to sleep in. As we went through the paperwork to admit her into the shelter, I was stunned to discover that far from being the 45 I had thought her to be, Leota was only 32. And I thought to myself, this is what violence and poverty does to a person. Quite simply, it wears them away, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

As we work with women like Leota at the Women’s Resource Center, the staff and volunteers are much like Martha. We work to meet the physical and emotional needs of those who come to us for help. We provide a safe environment, access to food and clothing and health care, assistance with transportation and permanent housing. Like Martha when Jesus and his followers came to her house, we know there is much to be done. Like Martha, we ask the impertinent questions, we question the authorities as we advocate on behalf of Leota and women like her. We help those like Leota understand the various systems they come in contact with, the legal, medical, welfare and educational systems, sometimes helping them

push those systems to meet their needs. We are helpful and compassionate, sometimes pushy and outspoken. But it is not enough.

If that is all we offer, important as it is to meet the immediate need, we only Band-Aid a mortal wound. We must also look critically at the roots and reasons for Leota's situation – we must recognize and understand the dynamics of violence and poverty – in order to respond adequately. To use a different metaphor, we have to look at the forest of a society that condones violence and creates poverty, if we are to adequately tend the trees of Leota's immediate needs. If we are to truly meet the needs of Leota and all those women, men and children like her, then we need to find ways to break the cycle of violence and poverty, not just find her a safe place to sleep and a change of clothes.

In this way, Mary can be our model, with her focus on Jesus, her search for understanding, her willingness to violate the cultural norms of her day to find the answers to hard questions. The “better part” that Mary chose in the story in Luke put things in the right context, for she understood that the immediate needs of the guests were not as crucial, *at that moment*, as hearing the words of Jesus.

Mary reminds us of the context of our actions, of the Kingdom of God that is both here and not yet fulfilled.

We need the gifts that both Mary and Martha bring. For Mary, in her devotion to Jesus, shows us how to love God while the persistent action of Martha helps us see how to love the neighbor. The love of God broadens, deepens and makes possible the love of neighbor, while the love of neighbor embodies God's love to the world. Different gifts in different women, yet to understand the depth and richness of our call to be faithful people in the world, we need them both. And we need those different gifts to be at work in and among us as a community. The world needs us to use all the gifts available to us to meet the challenges we face.

But we most not only recognize and use the gifts each individual brings to the table, we must also look inside ourselves to see what gifts may lie dormant inside us. Just as Jesus called Martha to look beyond and beneath her actions for the "better part" that Mary understood, we, too, can nurture and grow those gifts that may not come naturally to us. Those of us who are Martha's can learn to slow down, to look at the big picture, to understand the context in new ways that can shape our actions. Those of us who

reflect Mary's more contemplative nature, can learn ways that our contemplation can move us to action.

For us to be the Good News to the world, for us to meet the challenges that face us, we must be open to all the gifts God has given. So let us honor all the Martha's and the Mary's among us. Let us heed Mary's call to listen more closely to the words of Jesus and let us respond to Martha's call to act on what we hear.

Amen.

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