

Lessons learned from Mary and Martha

Today we are looking at the all too familiar story of Mary and Martha. We too often read this story in stark terms of black and white, yet the story is more complex than one doing what is right by sitting at Jesus's feet and the other doing wrong by focusing on the kitchen chores rather than Jesus. It is looking at the greater implications that we learn the message to us today.

This story comes after we have been told in Luke 9:51 "*As the time approached for him to taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem*" (Luke 9:51). Jesus 'Galilean ministry has come to an end. Now, everything that happens will lead to His crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to die. He knows his time on earth is short and so he is trying to ensure that his teachings are deeply embedded into the minds and hearts of his disciples. And, Jesus is also taking the time to, in a sense, say goodbye to those he cared for deeply, in this instance Mary and Martha. And so, a few miles east of Jerusalem, in the town of Bethany, he stopped at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. As we know from other scripture this family was very important to Jesus.

And so Luke writes: "*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him*" (Luke 10:38). The importance of hospitality in the Jewish culture of Jesus 'day cannot be overemphasized. The responsibility for hospitality fell primarily on the women of the home. Showing hospitality was Martha's spiritual gift. Wonderful hospitality that she had shown to Jesus on other occasions. But spiritual gifts, if not utilized in the right way, can actually cause us to miss out on blessings.

But going back to the passage, Luke continues, “*She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said*” (Luke 10:39). Now this sentence needs to be emphasized, because it is an incredible verse in the social context and cultural norms of that day. Luke is telling us that Mary (and by implication, Martha) were disciples of Jesus! Jesus was recognized as a Rabbi, and only the disciples of a Rabbi were allowed to sit at their feet. But only males were allowed to be disciples; never women. Jesus broke the mold of cultural standards! He allowed women to be His disciples and in His inner circle! Jesus changes the social order and social stigmas of fallen humanity! Following Jesus is always counter-cultural. When we try to make Him culturally relevant we strip His message and ministry of transformational power. “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male no female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:28).

So this is one of the lessons we learn from this story and that is we are all called to be Christ’s disciples. Throughout the Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures have shown women playing important roles in the salvation story. Women were welcome and even invited to sit at the feet of Jesus and this is important for all of us to learn. Service to God starts with us sitting and learning at the feet of the Savior. For us that means sitting in contemplation of scripture. It means sitting in communion with the Holy Spirit to grow in faith and to learn how best to serve our risen Lord.

Unfortunately, while Mary was **sitting**, Martha was **serving**, but she lost sight of why she served. And this is an important part of this story. “*But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’*” (Luke 10:40). Sometimes when we are serving, we lose sight of whom we are serving, especially when we see others sitting around, doing nothing. From all accounts Martha was a godly lady, but for some reason she let this experience get to her. She took hospitality seriously and wanted to make

sure everything was perfect, after all, Jesus deserves nothing less than our best. But in this instance, Martha wasn't focused on the joy of serving Jesus. She wasn't focused on this being a gift to Jesus. She was only focused on her many tasks, feeling overburdened, becoming resentful of the work that she was having to do, feeling like the burden was on her alone. And it was this attitude that Jesus addresses when he speaks to her.

People talk about his response to Martha as a rebuke, but we don't know the tone in which he said the words. I tend to think of him saying these words with love. "*Martha, Martha...you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better,*" (Luke 10:41-42). Martha's biggest problem was she was so busy serving Jesus that she was neglecting sitting with Him. She was so focused on working for Jesus that she neglected her relationship with Him. It's a problem of religiosity – serving God, working for God, while neglecting our relationship with God. Here is a foundational truth: **Your service to God should always be an extension of your relationship with God.**

Jesus did not acquiesce to Mary's sitting at his feet. He applauds it. Jesus affirms Mary as his disciple as well as her choice to abide with him. Jesus declares that "one thing" is needed as his disciple: a kind of attentiveness to Jesus that glories in his presence and a serving that bears eternal fruit.

Not long after visiting Mary and Martha, Jesus uses a vine as a teaching metaphor (John 15). As he walks through the grapevines of the Kidron Valley, Jesus emphatically endorses a choice like Mary's. He instructs the disciples how to live without his physical presence. The key, he says, is abiding in him and allowing his words to abide in them. For apart from Jesus, they will not be able to do anything of kingdom value. It is to the Father's glory that they bear much fruit. Mary models that fruit will not be born apart from remaining in Jesus.

I was talking with my sister yesterday and told her what the theme of this sermon was. She asked me which I thought I was - a Mary or a Martha. I told her that was the question too often asked, but it is the wrong way to think. Each of us needs to be a Mary *and* a Martha.

As disciples, we are called both to sit *and* to serve. We are called both to abide *and* to bear fruit. We sit and hear Jesus's word. We bow at his feet in worship. We kneel before him in prayer. In all these ways, we follow after Mary's example at the feet of Jesus. It is in this place that we find the discernment, clarity, wisdom, strength, and courage to bring Christ's loving presence into the world.

In our desire to follow God's call by serving him with everything we have, we can easily find ourselves overcommitted, "worried and troubled about many things." Distracted. In a culture that exalts multitasking and a "we-can-do-it-all" mentality, we have a teacher who invites us to learn his way and adopt his priorities. This one, who Paul says "ascended on high ... and gave gifts," gives each of us gifts for such a time to best express God's love in our appointed generation (Ephesians 4:8, NIV).

We each have our uniquely given expression in the body of Christ. But if we are *all* trying to do it *all*, we are driven to distraction. Instead, we need to remain and abide in Jesus by sitting at his feet. We receive and absorb his love. We hear Jesus's word, and these words remain in us. For apart from him, we can do nothing (John 15:5).

Friends, how will you choose to serve? Many of us find ourselves mostly like Martha, but we can learn from Mary. Distraction is sometimes translated as "cumbered." "Cumbered" speaks to hindrance, hampering, and obstruction. How might our hampered and hindered lives stand as an obstruction to the lasting fruit Christ desires to bear in and through us? What might it look like for us to abide at the feet of

Jesus and to receive his invitation to be *unencumbered* by the weight of self-imposed responsibility, anxiety, and control?

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

How fitting are these words! The one who sits at the rabbi’s feet learns the rabbi’s yoke. Now you need to understand what a rabbi’s yoke was. The rabbi’s yoke was his teachings and understandings of the Torah. The rabbi’s yoke was also the rabbi’s way of living and being in the world. Jesus’s yoke is easy and light. With Jesus’s yoke, there is work *and* there is rest. Jesus invites you: “Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how ... Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace” (Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message*). This is what we are called to do. Sit. Listen. Learn. Then Go and Do. Amen.