

Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV) - Jesus Visits Martha and Mary

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.[a] Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."



TUNING IN

Most people I know consider Jesus to be a pretty fair-minded kind of guy, at least until they consider the story of Mary and Martha. You see, one day Jesus visits a certain village where Martha welcomes him into her home. She has set up an ancient equivalent of a meet-and-greet for him. Martha's house is packed with curious villagers who have been hearing of Jesus for quite some time and never had a chance to see him or hear his words of wisdom for themselves. As the convener of the party, Martha has quite a task at hand. Ancient hospitality customs dictate that she make the guests feel at home, which includes preparing and cleaning the house, and providing food and drink. Any of Martha's female relatives would have been expected to help her in the kitchen while the others recline and enjoy conversation.

So Martha is scurrying around preparing cheese plates, gathering olives, figs, and dates into bowls, making hummus, baking flatbread, and refilling water pitchers and wine glasses. As she works, she expects her sister Mary to help, but Mary is quite content simply to sit at Jesus's feet and take in his wisdom.

Martha is a little perturbed. In fact, after waiting expectantly for Mary's help, Martha is fuming. Bursting out in front of everyone, Martha exclaims, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

One might expect Jesus to have a little compassion for his host. One might even envision Jesus gently scolding Mary, reminding her to "Do unto others" or that "it is more blessed to give than to receive."

That's not what happened this time. Instead of scolding Mary, Jesus reproaches Martha. "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."

Many people who read this passage object to the way Jesus handles the situation. They passionately defend Martha, asking why Jesus doesn't seem to have sympathy for someone who's throwing a party—for HIM—and is working her tail off to provide hospitality—on HIS behalf. Martha has to work twice as hard because her sister is sitting

idly by, listening to Jesus as if she's one of the invited guests. Surely, Martha would have loved a few moments at Jesus' feet, too, but she was too busy taking care of everyone else, including her sister.

Worried and distracted. That's what Jesus sees when he looks at Martha fussing around in the background. She's a busy and distracted person. We all feel a bit of the offense that Martha would have in being called out in this way, don't we? We run from activity to activity, obligation to obligation, all because we're trying to be good people, put food on the table, and live as respectable contributors to society, in addition to giving our children and grandchildren every opportunity to excel. Hopefully we're also trying to be disciples of Jesus. We hear Jesus scolding **us** when he says, "you are worried and distracted by many things ..." We want to respond, "But I was only doing what I thought you wanted from me!"

If everyone were like Mary, would anyone ever get any work done? We'd all be sitting idly by expecting *someone else* to do all the hard work, only there would be no one else. To privilege Mary over Martha seems like the ultimate in naïveté, endorsing a whole system where people feel entitled to anything they want without working for it.

Well, catch your breath if you're adding your voice to these objections. One mistake we constantly make with Jesus is taking his words, which were uttered in a particular time and contextual situation, and thinking that he's speaking to **every** time and **every** situation.

For example, when Jesus sends out his disciples, instructing them to venture into the countryside carrying no bag, no purse, and no sandals, many think he's speaking about what's expected of all of his disciples for all time. We're supposed to give away everything we have if we are to be true followers of Jesus. Yet at another time, Jesus commands his disciples to take up their purse and bag, and if they don't have a sword to get one (Luke 22:36). While Jesus's words of wisdom tend to stand for all time, this doesn't mean we can ignore the context he was speaking within and apply it to every situation.

Think about our present story for a moment as if it happened today. If Jesus were literally to come to **your** home to discuss his thoughts on life, what do you think would be more important for you to do as host: make sure everyone got brownies and coffee, or make sure everyone **including you** was able to feast on every word Jesus had to say? Remember, this is **Jesus** we're talking about, not some minor philosopher!

In Martha's day, she couldn't simply say, "Oh, they're recording his talk so I'll just catch it later." You couldn't even look up Jesus clips on YouTube. This may be the only opportunity she will ever have to hear Jesus speak in such a small, intimate setting. Are hummus and pita really so important?

Of course, Martha might object that it was out of her high respect for Jesus that she sacrificed her opportunity to sit at his feet, and provide him a few figs and dates. Yet how

respected do you suppose someone like Jesus felt to have someone essentially saying, “I’ve got more important things to do than listen to what you have to say?”

In sanctioning Mary’s apparent idleness over Martha’s work, Jesus was not authorizing idleness as a permanent ideal, or putting down all work as unnecessary. He was giving permission to “keep the main thing the Main Thing.” When he was speaking, the Main Thing was to set aside whatever you were doing and listen. How else were his words to be heard, remembered, and passed down to later generations?

Spending time in idleness ~ at rest ~ or just soaking in the wise words of our Savior, is vital. And it is vital not just when we’ve been working hard but also when we are agitated about looming catastrophes, whether personal, denominational, or global. Our instinct in times of crisis is often to get busy and grasp hold of every scrap of security we can.

The story of Mary and Martha suggests a different approach: that instead of running about “worried and distracted by many things,” we stop, ... *breathe*,... look around, ... and listen carefully—listening to each other as children of God, listening to God’s Earth, and listening to the teachings of Jesus.

Most of all, we are called to restore our connection to an unhurried God. We are called to “sit at the feet of Jesus”—which for us is the Spirit of the Living Christ (Holy Spirit). We sit quietly, listening for the direction of the Spirit, refusing to stand up and act until we’ve heard what we are being *called* to do. Then, we are called to respond once we have received direction. Sometimes the direction will be to act, and at other times we should continue to be passive and thoughtful long enough to reconnect with the Spirit and follow our best and surest Source of Hope.

PRAYER

For times when we lose touch with the big picture and what’s important
.....forgive us, O God.

For the times when we’ve lived to work,
rather than worked to live . . . forgive us.

Help us be truly present to you, O God.

Help us be mindful that our connection to you exists right here in the present,
and putting off time to tune in to you right now robs us
of the deep peace and assurance you have to give.

In this moment we hear your promise:

“I am with you always.

It is never too late to make better choices.”

You do not ask us to give up our work
but you invite us to simply pay attention.

We are your children, and we want to dwell with you. Amen.