

From Our Home to Theirs: Mary and Martha
Luke 10:38-42
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First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC
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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.'

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By now you should have received a letter inviting you to join your fellow members in making a financial commitment to support the church for 2017. If you read the letter you received in the mail, you know that our stewardship goal for next year is to increase our commitment to mission. As a congregation, we have spent a lot of time and energy these past five years making sure our house is in good order. Now we are making a commitment to think about our neighbor's households – in Charlotte and throughout the world.

The church is the body of Christ in the world. In a very real way, we are Christ's hands and feet. So as we think about increasing our presence beyond these walls, we will be reflecting on the places in Scripture where Jesus visits people in their homes as a way to teach us what kind of impact we might make in Christ's name.

Our second Scripture for today is from the gospel of Luke. This is the story of when Jesus visited the home of Martha and Mary. Listen with me for the word of God...

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So – first, a confession:

As I thought about what to preach this morning after reading the Scripture from Luke's gospel, there was a big part of me – call it my alter-ego – that wanted to take this occasion to reinterpret Jesus' words and completely redeem Martha.

I thought about offering my own translation (how would you know that my knowledge of Greek, the original language of the New Testament, is rusty?) In my translation, I would direct Jesus' admonition not to Martha, but to Mary. The gospel

according to Pen might record Jesus as saying: “You know...Martha makes an excellent point. Mary, why don’t you get yourself up and start helping your sister with her work. Quit your lollygagging. How could you be so disrespectful?”

Wouldn’t that sound better than the original?

My choice to reinterpret this passage would, of course, be strategic. They say a good preacher works to understand the Scripture and the congregation. I know you. For most people in this congregation, you are Marthas.

You are the ones who come to worship.

You serve on committees.

You go on mission trips.

You fill out your pledge cards the day they come in the mail.

You bring your kids to choir.

You take casseroles to new parents.

What would happen to the ministry of this church if all of you Marthas decided to stop serving; stop reaching out to the community; stop offering hospitality; stop welcoming; stop working behind the scenes – and just plop down at Jesus’ feet to listen?

I shudder to think...but you and I both know the wheels of our ministry would come to a grinding halt.

What I wanted to do is flip the story on its head and chastise Mary for her laziness; to hold up Martha as the paragon of Christian discipleship – in the hopes that all of you Marthas would continue your good work.

And now that you have heard my confession, I beg your forgiveness.

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As much as I would have preferred my translation of this passage of scripture, Jesus said the opposite:

“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.”

Ouch.

Can you imagine? Who of us hasn’t been there, right? Doing the work that needs to be done and wondering why other people aren’t stepping up to the plate to lend us a hand?

In my house I have developed a strategy for such a situation. I’m not necessarily proud of it, but it is one that I implement from time to time. If I am busying myself – washing dirty dishes, putting away the clean dishes, folding the laundry, or something of the sort – and feel as if I am not getting the help I deserve, my chores – all of a sudden – become much more audible.

I set the plates down with a little more authority than before. Sometimes the pots I am putting away happen to bang together. I bump the laundry basket into doors.

I wonder if Martha was doing the same thing. I wonder if Martha could see Mary out of the corner of her eye – just sitting there – as she went about setting the table, cooking the food, making the bed, checking to make sure the bathroom was clean...

I bet Martha banged a few pots around, too. Maybe even huffed and puffed a little. And finally, when it was clear that Mary was completely ignoring her sister, Martha lit into Jesus. She was polite, mind you, but you notice that she didn't chastise Mary for her inaction; she implored Jesus to instruct Mary to get off her duff and offer Martha some help.

I wonder what Mary heard when she was sitting at Jesus' feet? The Scripture doesn't tell us. I doubt she was only ignoring her sister, Martha. She was probably enthralled by what Jesus was saying. Was Jesus telling Mary another one of his parables? Was he telling her about who was truly blessed: the poor, the broken-hearted, the meek? Was she getting advice on what it was going to mean to carry Jesus' message into the world? Was Jesus teaching her from the Bible?

Whatever it was, Martha was missing it. And she was probably in such a tizzy that she wouldn't have been able to hear it anyway. She wasn't as interested in hearing from Jesus as she was in complaining to Jesus.

So what are we to make of Jesus' response?

Mary has chosen the "better part?"

That sounds pretty dismissive to me – especially as someone who has more Martha-tendencies...

What point is Jesus trying to make when he rebukes Martha?

One of my teachers offers his take. He says,

"There is nothing wrong in and of itself with Martha's fixing the food. This is the way people show love and welcome and hospitality and care. There is nothing wrong, in fact there is something absolutely essential, about showing one's love of God and neighbor by baking the bread and washing the olives, by setting the table. Martha, preparing that meal of hospitality, is doing a good thing--a necessary thing--an act of service—

but if we try to do this kind of service apart from the life-giving Word of the gospel, apart from the vision that comes only from God, it will distract us and finally wear us down. Mary has chosen to listen to the Word. Jesus, the living Word, is present, right in her house, and if she is going to love God and love neighbor, if she is going to

show hospitality to the stranger and care for the lost, then everything depends on hearing and trusting that word.”¹

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There is something in the tone of Martha’s voice that resonates with me. It’s that weariness that I can hear just below the surface – that borderline disillusionment – that feeling of growing disappointment.

Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?

This work that you and I are called to do together in Christ’s name can be hard. It’s overwhelming. To step out of this place and be the hands and feet of Christ in a city and world that is so broken, so polarized, so complicated?

To confront problems like racism, hunger, income inequality, human trafficking, school resegregation, and lack of affordable housing with a few thousand dollars, a team of volunteers, and good intentions?

Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?

But we get busy.

We form committees. We study the problem. We develop strategies. We mobilize volunteers. We take action that we can measure.

And, as my teacher says, there is nothing wrong with any of that. In fact, it is necessary and important...but if we try to do mission work apart from the life-giving Word of the gospel, apart from the vision that only comes from God, all of our efforts will eventually distract us and wear us down.

If you have ever been on a mission trip – as a youth or an adult, in recent years or in a former life – I bet you know what I am talking about.

Most mission trips are task oriented. It’s about what we are there to do. What our mission partners need built. How many buckets of concrete we can pass down the line. How many patients we can see at the clinic...

And, usually, there comes this moment in the week or so we are there, that we realize that there will never be enough buckets of concrete; there will never be enough time to see patients; there will never be enough mission teams to meet the needs of our neighbors and partners.

I call it our “Martha Moment.” And there, right there, is where God tends to show up and remind us that our purpose in getting out of our home and into the homes of our neighbors is not only about what we can do – but about what we might represent to those who are our sisters and brothers in Christ.

¹ Long, Tom, “Mary and Martha,” *Day 1*, July 22, 2007.

My first mission trip as a pastor was to Malawi, Africa. I was 26 years old, and for some reason 18 sets of parents trusted me to take their precious children to another continent – to the 5th poorest country in the world.

I remember being especially concerned that our group have “enough work to do” – in part because staying busy feeding children, or holding orphaned babies, or building houses for storing grain was a way to cope with the incredible need we were witnessing, and in part because we had spent thousands of dollars to travel to a place where most people lived on a dollar a day and I didn’t want to be sitting around on our hands.

One afternoon about halfway through our trip at a small rural village where we had spend a good portion of the week, our host told me that we would be spending the afternoon doing evangelism. *Come again?* I said. Aren’t there weeds we can pull? Or rocks that need to be rolled from one place to another?

But that is what he wanted our group to do – so after lunch we went out through the dusty village – two by two – visiting people in their homes or sitting around their wells to tell the people about Jesus and why he was such good news.

Everybody in the village had already heard about Jesus, of course. They all attended the church a couple of times a week, but that wasn’t the point.

The point was for those of us who were there: the helpers and the helped; the overly-resourced and the under-resourced; the guests and the hosts – to be reminded of the promise that we were not alone...that God is out in front of us, gathering us together...that our work counts for something...and that because of Christ’s resurrection we can trust in God and watch for a new creation.

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I think that is what God desires when we leave the comfort of our home and care for our neighbors in theirs: that we will do something, but that we will also be something:

An embodiment of God’s promises,
An ambassador of the good news,
A reminder that in Christ Jesus we have been given a
hope that does not disappoint in spite of the
brokenness we face.

Wherever we go and whatever we do in Christ’s name, our
neighbors need to hear that...
and so do we.

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