

Message July 30, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
“Discipleship: Doing AND Being” Rev. Trish Eckert

I hesitated to turn to the story of Mary and Martha as part of our “Women in the Bible” series, because almost always, what is emphasized is the contention and competition between these sisters. Yet, I couldn’t seem to move past the feeling that this was what I needed to delve into this week – it’s been a meaningful experience for me, and maybe what has developed from my reading and reflecting will also touch on something important for you.

Our focus today is on the reading from Luke, yet I also wanted to include the text from John to provide us additional layers of understanding regarding the depth of the relationships between and among Jesus, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. In the Gospel readings, we get a sense of how Jesus experiences their family spirit and friendship.

Interestingly, I chose this Sunday for us to explore the story of Mary and Martha without first realizing that the Catholic church celebrates a feast day for Martha on July 29th. And it happens that as of 2021, Pope Francis expanded her feast day to include her siblings, Mary and Lazarus, in recognition of their welcome of and witness to Christ. So, we have the synchronicity of arriving on the weekend of their feast day.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke is one of those Biblical stories that captures a complicated and very human moment in time. Just to get it out there, this story about Mary and Martha has always irritated me – as a self-identified doer: mother of four, always working full-time while going to school full-time, running here and there and invariably squeezing in one more task – I tend to judge people who take a slower approach to things. I also tend to get resentful and burn myself out, so now you know I’ve still got a lot to learn in this life! Bottom line: I can easily relate to Martha in Luke’s text.

Luke presents us with a picture of two of the women in Jesus’ life, and their relationships to him and with him – women who were perhaps, in subtle ways, turning expectations upside down, living out in their own time and their own way his countercultural teachings. The home where they live, for instance, Luke specifically identifies as Martha’s home – not Lazarus’, or any other man’s – unusual in patriarchal early Palestine. And on this particular day, Martha’s sister Mary is spending her time with Jesus, sitting at his feet and listening to him teach – in her time, that was something the men did, the disciples, not the women.

We get the sense that this is not a particularly significant or unusual day, and that this is not Jesus’ first visit to Martha’s home, that he is likely welcomed there as extended family, comfortable and familiar. He knows them well, and they know him well. Many of us who have brothers or sisters, or who have been around brothers or sisters, will likely recognize the emotional dynamic that’s going on here. Mary is sitting with Jesus;

Martha sees her; and she is frustrated, and perhaps a little bit envious. Mary is not paying attention to her responsibilities, and Martha is left on her own. Martha complains to Jesus, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all this work by myself?” And then she follows that up, not with a diplomatic sort of question such as, Lord, would you mind mentioning to Mary that she needs to be getting her work done?

No. Instead, Martha says to Jesus, “TELL HER to help me.” She sounds like she’s talking to another brother, not the Son of God.

Let’s take a pause from this interaction and turn our attention for a moment to what we heard in the Gospel of John. In that text, Jesus has arrived days after the sisters summoned him – Martha and Mary are receiving support and consolation from friends and neighbors while sitting vigil for their deceased brother. Lazarus was ill, and he died before Jesus arrived. Both women, at different points, when Jesus approaches them, give voice to their pain and devastation: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” It seems that both Martha and Mary were close friends of Jesus – to speak with such authenticity, basically, without a filter, reveals intimate bonds among them. In both Luke and John, Martha speaks her truth, and for Mary, in both texts, she kneels at the feet of Jesus – she doesn’t utter a word in Luke’s Gospel while Martha is striving to provide hospitality, but in the wake of her brother’s death, she gives voice to her pain.

Maybe because there are so few stories that feature women in the Bible, we put a lot of pressure on these readings and spend a lot of energy interpreting them and working to understand. The picture within Martha’s home that’s been painted for us over the years, is one of a rapt Mary sitting with Jesus as he talks, her face full of joy, and in the background, Martha, cooking or carrying a basket or a water jug, her face full of irritation. (Do a Google image search and you’ll see what I mean.) Keep in mind, the house must have been filled with people – the disciples were traveling with Jesus, and it would take a great deal of time and energy to attend to the hospitality that was called for. Yet when Martha gives voice to her frustration, Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her. This story is often read as a lesson in priorities, the take-away being that we need to stop working and spend all our time praying, that being busy and distracted is something to be ashamed of, that Mary had it right and Martha had it wrong.

There are some truths to be found in those lessons, certainly. Our world is moving faster and faster; and we increasingly value ourselves and others by how much work we can get done, how much we can produce or earn or invest or buy. I have confessed to you that I struggle with a tendency toward busy-ness and judging others. It is easy to lose touch with quiet, with prayer, with time in conversation with God, with our own reflection and study. Busyness can exhaust us, pull us away from our loved ones, disconnect us from our neighbors and from God.

But I do not believe that this story is telling us that Martha is wrong, and Mary is right.

Martha is not wrong to be annoyed that she has no help with the work – and that is work that’s never actually described in the Gospel, even though she is often depicted as cooking or preparing a meal – practicing the ministry of hospitality, the ministry of welcome. The translation of the text we heard says that Martha is “distracted by her many tasks.” In the original Greek, Martha is distracted by (DIAK-OHN-EEOHN) diakonion – which is the origin of our word deacon – someone who works on behalf of those who suffer or are poor or ill. The work of the deacon is to take care of God’s people, to care for the world – diakonion means service or ministry. So, Martha was complaining that Mary was praying and studying, but not putting in the work of the diaconate – and we don’t really ever know what work that is.

And there is certainly a way to hear Jesus’ response differently – rather than scolding Martha, we can hear his response as compassionate. *Martha, Martha*, he says – not just once – *you are worried by many things*. “Be at peace,” he seems to be saying. You only need one thing, that which Mary has chosen – listening to the word of God – because everything else, including Martha’s work, comes from that.

Jesus may not be saying one should choose prayer over work, or that we should admire Mary more than Martha, but rather, that both kinds of work, that the examples of both sisters, are necessary to our lives as faithful people – contemplation and service, study and labor, prayer and action, being and doing. The Gospel of Luke illustrates Mary and Martha showing us two kinds of hospitality, each of them attentive to their guest in a different way. They show us two kinds of presence, two kinds of ministry – perhaps even two kinds of prayer - if we can pray with our hands and our feet as well as with our mouths. I came across one commentary as I was studying this text that said that Mary and Martha represent two dimensions of spirituality. The idea is that Mary goes deep, and Martha goes long. Mary went to the depth of faith, and Martha lived it out and bore witness to it in the world.

I think it’s interesting that this particular story falls in this place in the Gospel of Luke. Just previous to this story, Jesus answered a question from a man who asked, “what must I do for eternal life?” The answer was to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate that. And in the story after today’s reading, Jesus will be asked another question, this time by his disciples: “Lord, teach us how to pray.” In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he lived out his faith, caring for his neighbor, doing the work of diakonia, helping another who was suffering. Following the scene of Mary and Martha, the disciples will seek to learn how to be in communion with God – to love the Lord with all their heart, mind, and soul.

Mary and Martha, in a sense, embody those two greatest commandments – love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself – and their story, sandwiched

between the Good Samaritan and the Lord's Prayer, is not intended to prove which way of living one's faith, in prayer or in service, is better than the other – whether Mary or Martha is more virtuous – but instead to show us that both are necessary, and connected, and that each inspires and gives meaning to the other.

Prayer opens our hearts and our minds to the movement of the Spirit toward the work we can do in the world. Spending time in study grounds our work and ministry, so that good works are not hollow. And it connects us to the work and faith of those who have gone before, Mary and Martha, the disciples of the early church, and all the saints in between and since.

Together, the inner work of Mary and the worldly work of Martha is the work of the Church and of its faithful people, you and I – to love God with all our heart, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.