

The story of Martha and Mary is much more than a quick lesson about a grumpy housewife and her sister who was totally devoted to Jesus; more than about Martha being busy and Mary being lazy; more than about Martha being wrong and Mary being right.

The story is very simple with very little action. Jesus, as usual, is on his way somewhere. He stops in to see his friends at Martha's home. As Martha prepares dinner, her sister Mary sits and listens to Jesus. Martha is irritated that she seems to be doing all the work, and asks, no, she tells Jesus make her sister get up to help her. And the stage is set for Jesus to teach all of us a lesson.

It's helpful to consider at what point in Jesus ministry this simple scene takes place. Jesus and his ministry have changed since he "set his face to Jerusalem" a few weeks ago. This is the final stretch of his journey; he is no longer in healing mode or in gathering of disciples mode. He's in full instructional mode. Do this. Be this. Next week it'll be "Pray like this" as he gives the disciples the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus is now *especially* full of purpose. His lessons about discipleship have become more focused, and more difficult. He is speaking now to those who know him and wants to teach them how to follow him. He wants them to understand that the journey, the process, their relationship with God, must be their first priority. That relationship is the grounding beneath all their activity.

The closer he gets to Jerusalem, the more urgent his lessons become. With that framework of urgency in mind, let's look a little closer at the scene in Martha's house. Jesus often teaches on the road, or by the sea but this story is set in a home, and he engages people he knows by name --- a clue that Jesus is speaking to our hearts, the place where our real selves' dwell. He's not speaking to the institution or the hierarchy of the church, as he often does.

This wouldn't seem strange to us, but Jesus is a guest in the home of two women he's not related to. That might have been a little scandalous for the community reading this for the first time. It also doesn't seem strange to us that Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him. But that was the posture of a student sitting at the feet of a teacher, a disciple with a rabbi. That was what men did -- not women of the day. Women didn't study. Women worked in the home. Mary is not only breaking cultural expectations, but Jesus is encouraging her!

This is also story about *true* hospitality; not just about providing food and shelter to your guest but *honoring* the true nature of that guest by listening and acknowledging who they are. True hospitality is the capacity to respond to the other -- in ways of giving AND receiving. True hospitality is welcoming Jesus to receive what he offers us and honor his place in our home, our hearts, as host.

Martha's' hospitality doesn't seem to bubble up from joy, but resentment and her talk is all about herself; she's not concerned with her guest. Her anxiety about getting things done gets in the way of true hospitality. Jesus doesn't tell her to stop cooking, he tells her to stop fretting, stop being distracted.

The original Greek adds some insight into Martha's distracted and resentful busy-ness -- -- perisparo --- being dragged along by much serving. listen to this Greek translation:

Martha had a sister called Mary, who having seated herself beside the Lord's feet, was listening to his word. But Martha was going around in circles, over-occupied with preparing the meal. And bursting in upon Jesus she assumed a stance over Him and said, Lord, is it not a concern to you that my sister has let me down to be preparing the meal along? Speak therefore to her at once that she takes hold and do her part with me. And answering, the Lord said to her, Martha, Martha, you are worried and excited about many things, but of few things there is need, or of one, for Mary choose out for herself the good portion, which is of such a nature that it shall not hastily be snatched away from her. "¹

Martha's resentment might come because she thinks she has no choice but to work while others learn because she is a woman. But Jesus tells her that's just not true. look, Mary has chosen. And she has made a good choice.

Martha has breached a code of hospitality by forgetting who her guest is and by not honoring WHO he is: the one for whom Colossians says all things were made. *"the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; the One who is before all things, and in him all things hold together."*² She breaches hospitality by putting her guest on the spot, wanting him to say what she cannot.

Instead of asking Mary herself to get up and help, she tries to shift the burden of her resentment to Jesus. Jesus doesn't pick it up though and instead chastises her, gently. Jesus tells her, "Martha, you can drive yourself crazy if that's what you chose to do. But don't think you don't have a choice. I'm telling you – you **do** have a choice. Look at Mary. She has made the best choice possible. And no one can take that away from her."

Martha is so distracted that she ignores the great gift of Jesus' presence; she misses that the living Word of God, has chosen to be in her home. She would rather use him to poke at her sister, than receive from him what he wants most to offer her. More help in the kitchen isn't what Martha needed, although that's what she wanted. She needed grounding in God's purpose.

There is an old English tradition that when the sovereign travelled around the countryside, he or she would stop at a subject's home and expect to be taken in of course. But once inside, the royal guest would **become the host**. That was the obligation of every royal subject.

¹ Wuest, Kenneth, "The New Testament: An Expanded Translation," Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids MI; 2002, p. 162.

² Colossians 1:15

That is what discipleship really is – allowing the Living God to be at home in us, not as guest but as **host** of our lives. Perhaps that is what Jesus expects of us and wants to teach us in this story. Mary’s example to us as true disciple is one of sitting and listening. And she was praised for that.

Mary was doing what God commanded. At Jesus’ baptism, on the mountaintop at the Transfiguration, God commanded all who could hear listen to him. Listen to him. Learn from him. Let him do what he came to do – transform you.

At the end of his ministry, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus leaves us with living illustrations of the greatest commandment: Just as few verses ago in the Gospel of Luke he said, “*Love the Lord your **God** with all your heart and love your **neighbor** as yourself.*”³ It is significant that he illustrated the command to love God and neighbor– chose a Samaritan – an outsider- to illustrate the point of loving neighbor and by choosing a woman – one of lesser status in that society -- to illustrate choosing to love God. Here Jesus invites us to love yourself by choosing the best God has to offer you – an honored place in your life and your heart.

Each Christian community can learn something as well. Perhaps we are cautioned not to set up a hierarchy of ministries – considering one better than another –but encouraged us to ground all we do in a focused relationship with Jesus Christ.

Maybe we are called to acknowledge and nurture the tension in discipleship. Not the tension that destroys, but the tension that holds us together, balancing activity and devotion. And once again we are encouraged to be good stewards of our choices --- how we choose to live and love in community, intentionally, faithfully, in the sight of God.

Personally, I would have liked Jesus to say to Mary at the very beginning of this story – “why don’t we move this conversation into the kitchen while Martha’s working so she’s not alone?” But we wouldn’t have learned very much if he had done that.

So, I’ll settle for imagining that the others who might have been there that day, those who might have been in the next room, waiting to have dinner served to them, understood that Jesus was modeling for them new expectations of discipleship and servanthood. I’d like to think they got up from their comfortable seats and gently said to Martha. Please, sit; let us do the dishes.

May you and I have the grace
to hear what God is saying
and heed God’s message for us today.

³ Luke 10:27