

July 25

A Tale of Two Sisters

Luke 10: 38-42

(Luke 10: 38-42 NRSV) 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. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

(Luke 10: 38-42 The Message) As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand."

The Master said, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."

It was the best of times . . . it was the worst of times.

Wait a minute, I think that is already taken.

Our story this morning is one that tells us a bit about a wandering Rabbi who was creating quite a buzz.

Somewhere along the way → Jesus meets two sisters (Mary and Martha) and their brother Lazarus.

It seems pretty obviously that they were more than just casual acquaintances.

In our passage this morning Jesus stops to have a meal with the family.

Later in John's gospel we hear about how Lazarus gets sick and dies and Jesus comes to call on the family and Martha complains that Jesus didn't arrive in time to save her brother from death, but miraculously, Jesus brings him back to life.

In the next chapter of John we then hear about a dinner party that was being held at their home and Jesus is one of the guests. During the evening Mary begins to anoint Jesus feet with a very expensive perfume and Judas begins to complain about how that is a waste of money.

From the gospels we can glean that Jesus had a very special and close relationship to this family.

Our story this morning is probably one that you are familiar with, but probably not all that excited about.

Jesus comes to the home of Mary and Martha in the town of Bethany, which is just a few hills over from Jerusalem → maybe two miles, but today it is very difficult to go between the Mount of Olives and Bethany because they are separated by a security barrier.

Martha welcomes Jesus into her home.

Martha has no doubt been very busy getting things ready for Jesus arrival. As you know, it takes a lot of work to get ready to entertain → especially when your guest is someone important.

- Cleaning

- Dusting

- Getting everything into the right place

- Food

You can't just serve anything to someone like Jesus

There is no reason for us to assume that Mary hasn't been helping Martha in getting everything ready for Jesus arrival.

Martha welcomes Jesus into their home and Mary stops helping her sister and turns all her attention to Jesus.

No big deal → right.

Well, it quickly becomes a big deal to Martha. She thinks that Mary should be helping her with all of the stuff that needs to get taken care of.

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Or as The Message puts it:

"Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand." (The Message)

We all know exactly what Martha was feeling. We have guests over, but instead of being able to spend time with them, we have a roast in the oven that needs attention or glasses that need to be filled or . . .

Somebody has to do all that stuff!

She had enough and wanted some help. Doesn't seem to be unreasonable, things would get done a lot quicker with two sets of hands than just one.

Jesus answer is rather perplexing

Instead of saying "Martha, you're right. It is not fair of me to monopolize Mary out here while you are in the kitchen slaving away. In fact, is there anything I can do to help?" he says in what sounds rather condescending:

"Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her." (The Message)

On the surface I am sure the first thought in Martha's head was that Jesus was a jerk → if he wanted to eat, the food had to be taken care of.

And unfortunately we have no idea what happened next, for the text ends right there. The story ends abruptly.

Martha should have been able to expect a compliment, from Jesus, not some rebuke, no matter how gentle.

It was, after all, a woman's place to be in the kitchen (or more likely out by the cooking fire).

The most interesting thing about this story though is that Mary is sitting there at Jesus' feet, looking for all the world like one of his disciples.

Women didn't do that  
Not in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Israel

Women weren't even allowed to study the scriptures – let alone engage in a discussion about them – especially with men present.

One first-century rabbi wrote,

"Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman."

I suspect this is not one of your favorite Bible stories, because, truth be told, if I asked you which of these two women you identified with, the majority would answer Martha.

I would.  
SOMEBODY has to do the work!

We don't want to sit around with eyes so firmly fixed on heaven that we are no earthly good!

William Barclay has it right when he wrote:

Lord of all pots and pans and things,  
Since I've no time to be,  
A saint by doing lovely things,  
Or watching late with Thee,  
Or dreaming in the dawn light,  
Or storming Heaven's gates,  
Make me a saint by getting meals,  
And washing up the plates.

Did Martha really get a raw deal in this story?

The more I think about it, the less I am convinced that she did.

After all, Jesus did not say she should not have been doing what she was doing, but rather,

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things..."

Or as The Message translates it:

"you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing"

Worried and upset, or anxious or disturbed or troubled or flustered - any of those work.

Jesus seems to be saying your consumed by busyness – and it does you, nor anyone else any good.

Last year, the staff went to a Time Management Seminar. Actually it was titled: Managing Multiple Priorities. We went to help each of us become more efficient in our use of time.

Of course one of the things that we learned was that the idea of Multi-tasking is a myth. You can't do multiple things well at the same time, the key is to identify tasks and do the ones that really matter.

He noted that most tasks can be assigned a priority code of A, B or C. And what he suggested is that we spend way too much of our time on C priorities.

Why is that?

Pretty simple -- C priorities are much easier to accomplish, and give you the impression that you are actually getting something done.

In other words you can keep busy with the C priorities all day and never get to the more important things.

The lesson from Mary and Martha is "Don't let the good (the C priorities) get in the way of the best (the A priorities).

So, are you a Mary or a Martha?

I won't ask for a poll, because I suspect the real truth is that most of us here are both.

We know the importance of getting things done and would never denigrate initiative or hard work. But we also know the importance of the spiritual dimension in our lives, and are willing to take time to develop and nourish it, because we need it, sometimes desperately. That is why we are gather here, not only today but week after week after week after week.

The lesson is a tale of two sisters, but I want to share with you another tale of two other sisters.

These two were very close in many ways. They had many of the same interests, many of the same experiences. Both had been raised in the church, and both drifted away a bit as they reached college age. Both married fine men, neither had children. But as the years went along, one came back to church and became very involved, the other just never managed.

The sister who came back to church suddenly and unexpectedly lost her husband. The pastor rushed over to her house, she met him at the door. She was in tears, to be sure, but she said,

"This is terrible. But I feel as if I have been preparing for this moment for most of my life."

She was right. She had sat through countless Sundays, heard dozens of sermons that involved dealing with the disasters we all experience from time to time, as if she were in training for just such a moment as this.

Not long after, the husband of the other sister died unexpectedly as well. She had no involvement with the church so that was a resource upon which she would not have thought of calling. She became more and more distressed and depressed, and finally needed to be institutionalized so she could get professional care. Her sister, after visiting her in the hospital said,

"Poor thing. When it came time for her to let down her bucket, she found out that she had no water in the well."

I honestly believe that this is what Jesus was referring to when he gently chastised Martha and credited Mary for choosing wisely, for taking Priority A instead of B or C.

The truth is there ARE moments in life when we need to "let down our bucket," to return to the wellsprings of courage and hope.

If we have not previously prepared, disaster awaits.

What we do here, week in and week out, year in and year out, as we gather for worship and study, is insure that when the bucket is let down, it will come up with the refreshing love of God that we need.

Are both Martha and Mary inside you?

Excellent!

Celebrate both. And keep your priorities straight.

Don't let the good get in the way of the best.