

**March 16, 2025**

**Sermon Text      Lk 10: 38-42 (NLT)**

38 As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught. 40 But Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me."

41 But the Lord said to her, "My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! 42 There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. Thanks be to God.

**SERMON      "everything [in] between: faith & works"**

The beloved story of Mary and Martha. Most of you have heard this story in some form or fashion before the reading of scripture from Luke this morning. Luke is the only Gospel to share this specific story – but it isn't the only story we have of Martha and Mary. Unlike the Gospel of John, the other gospel to tell stories about them, we learn nothing else about these two sisters from Luke except Martha is the one that welcomes Jesus and his disciples into her home. The Gospel of John is the book that tells us where this home is located: Bethany. John is the one that tells us they have a brother, Lazarus, and they all live together. John is the one that tells us the story of the sisters' response to Lazarus' death, and of Jesus' amazing resurrection of him after three days – a foreshadowing of Jesus' own resurrection. John is the one that tells us about Mary's gift to Jesus, anointing him with expensive perfume in gratitude.

In these 5 verses from Luke, we have a different glimpse of Jesus' relationships, and the guidance it provides as we navigate our own relationship with Jesus. So let's look at this familiar story, listening to the seeming opposites it presents, and how it can inform our own walk of faith.

First, it's always important to place these stories in the context of where they fall in the Bible. We've talked about the events immediately preceding this passage: Jesus starting his final journey to Jerusalem by responding to three

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would-be disciples about the cost of being his disciple. For those that took on that challenge, they will: accept never really being at home on earth again; give up earthly security and responsibility; and have the single minded focus it takes to truly be his disciple. To those that accepted this new reality, he sent them out to spread his ministry and message – not just 12 this time, but 72 of them – sending them out in pairs into villages to heal and teach, and learn how to cope with the rejection that comes at times with sharing Jesus with others. Then he’s confronted by a religious expert who wants to challenge and disprove Jesus’ understanding of the Torah. We looked at that exchange last Sunday, and the response Jesus gave to this man in the story of The Man who fell Victim to Robbers – or, the story of The Good Samaritan – and its message of a radical understanding of who is a “neighbor.”

From the story of the Good Samaritan, Luke takes us immediately into this story: Jesus pausing in a small village, and welcomed into the home of Martha. These sisters may have been strangers to Jesus before Martha opened up her home to this famous rabbi. But, they respect and see him as the Messiah. Martha doesn’t call him teacher, like the religious expert in the story just before this one; she calls him “Lord.” Master. She’s seen glimmers of the divine nature of his message and through it, a recognition of who sent Jesus to them. She’s respectful – Jesus didn’t have to brush the dust of this household from his feet like some of his 72 disciples would need to do on their mission trips. He was welcomed, honored. And so, in the code of hospitality of that time, Martha starts preparing to feed him and the disciples with him. Just like today: hospitality means food. So she starts putting out the spread.

But her sister Mary doesn’t follow this response to Jesus; she doesn’t follow the norms of women in those days. She doesn’t stay in the kitchen and dining area helping to prepare this big dinner. She joins others who were sitting around Jesus, listening to his stories, listening to his explanations, soaking up the teaching of this radical and mind blowing teacher. It was radical for her to even be in that space – women didn’t sit at the feet of the Jewish rabbis, learning alongside men. Luke again sends a strong message in this Gospel about inclusion, by showing Jesus’s ministry and message is for everyone, including the marginalized of this society, including women. This is an opportunity of a lifetime – Mary isn’t just hearing the teaching second hand from others who may have heard Jesus’ teaching in other cities and villages in Galilee. Now he’s in her village, in her home, sitting in front of her, expounding on his teaching. She isn’t going to miss the opportunity to hear his teaching first hand. She stays in the room he is in,

soaking it all in. And Jesus doesn't turn her away. He doesn't tell her she can't be part of the same teaching as the men in the room. Jesus gives direct access to himself TO EVERYONE.

But conflict arises. Martha's getting stressed putting this big dinner together by herself, and her resentment comes out in a passive aggressive form of communication. She doesn't go to Mary and take her aside to ask for help. She doesn't even talk to her directly. She probably thought – why should I even have to ask her? Mary wasn't acting in a way a woman should act. Mary knows what it takes to make and put out a big dinner, so she knows this isn't a one woman job! So instead, Martha goes to Jesus, in front of everyone. The translation I read says "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me." Trying to shame Mary into coming to help her. Trying to get Jesus to order Mary into doing something Martha thinks Mary ought to automatically know to do. Diminishing the value of Mary's choice at that moment.

Jesus doesn't respond as Martha hoped. Some interpret it as scolding her. Instead, I hear a gentle response. But in this translation, I hear kindness, gentleness, affection, a correction of Martha without demeaning her: "My dear Martha, you're worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her." Jesus isn't jumping in defending Martha's viewpoint and frustration. He isn't going to tell Mary she is wrong in her choice. He sends a gentle message about priorities, and what in our faith journey is really worth worrying and fretting over.

The words that are often translated as "Mary has chosen the better part," or "Mary has chosen the better portion" often are interpreted as part of an "either/or" choice. And some of us – most likely the women sitting here today, since this is a favorite scripture choice for women's Bible studies – have had the question posed as if it were a personality indicator: "Are you a Mary? Or, are you a Martha?" So the task oriented people sheepishly raise their hand – and I would be among them – and say "yes, I'm probably a little more like Martha." And those deep introverts among us, who aren't going to be the ones to head up a fellowship or Christian Ed or mission event, think, "well, I'm not like Martha, so I guess I'm a Mary." We, male and female, somewhat feel forced into this choice: are you a Mary? Or are you a Martha? We love, and also hate, forced choice questions.

So? Is this a choice between two extremes, an “either/or” polarity that tells us who we are and how to approach our discipleship with God? I don’t think so – “are you a Martha or are you a Mary,” is posed by our Lenten devotional for this week as the wrong question – and I agree with that analysis. That’s why I had us listen to a slightly different translation of this passage in the New Living Translation. Rather than wording it as a best, or better, choice, it states, “There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it ....” This interpretation doesn’t mean that what Martha was doing was always wrong. What she is doing is described by Luke with the Greek words *pollen diakonian*, meaning “much service.” *Diakonos*, the root word, is where our word “deacon” comes from. Martha is performing a service, also translated in other parts of the New Testament as “ministry.” Her *pollen diakonian*, hospitality, is a service to Jesus and the others there in her home; it’s her ministry.

Jesus is just providing a little correction on her focus and the way she’s approaching this ministry. The Greek word *periaspato* means she “was distracted.” So the issue Jesus is responding to is what verse 40 tells us, “Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing.” Hers was also a necessary ministry. She was doing what her culture demanded: show hospitality to someone she invited into her home. But Jesus is gently teaching her: her worry and concern over the details of that ministry are getting her distracted from the main point of the ministry. Jesus saw into Mary’s heart, and knew she dropped the priority of hospitality in that moment of time. There is an urgency at this point in Jesus’ teaching on his way to Jerusalem that undergirds all of his interactions. And it is here in his message to Martha, and Mary: time is limited. The time for the Kingdom of God to arrive is here. In this situation, “there is only one thing to be worried about ...” And what we fret and worry about shows whether or not we have discovered and understand that urgent message.

The preacher Karoline Lewis wrote, “‘now is the time’ does not then have to mean one is better than the other. ‘Now is the time’ does not then have to mean there is an ‘either/or’ when it comes to following Jesus. ‘Now is the time’ does not then have to mean comparison and judgment.” It’s not choosing between sinking into Jesus’ teaching and relationship with God, OR service to God; relationship with God – our faith – and acts of faith – our service in the name of God, are both necessary. They are not an “either/or.” They are a “both/and.” But our relationship with God, sitting with his Word and the teachings of Christ, listening to God speak to us, is important – for it helps lead to the other. Faith leads to

ministry, dedicated urgent service. And, dedicated service also grows faith. There is circularity in their relationship, not two extremes on either end of a spectrum.

The relationship of “faith” and “works” has long been debated in the life of the Christian church. Even in the early years of the church, the great writers of the letters in the New Testament debated the place and order of the faith responses we have to the unearned grace given to us through the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: “Can we boast ... that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law (of Moses). It is based on faith.” And so followers that leaned toward Paul preached “faith alone” is what distinguishes us as Christians. The apostle James, in his letter, tempered this slightly. He wrote: “What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?... you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deed, it is useless.” Both faith and works are necessary.

And so, sandwiched in the middle of Luke’s lessons on discipleship, and the consequences of rejecting Jesus’ teaching that follow this story, is the challenge of Martha and Mary. In this season of Lent preacher Karoline Lewis can coach us as gently as Jesus. She writes: “When we have “both/and” in mind, we start to realize that faith is seasonal. There are times for doing and times for listening. There are times for practicing and times for learning. However we choose to describe the discipleship expressed by Mary and Martha, if we are honest we have been both. We need to be both, for different reasons, and we also realize that there is a lot of possibility in between.” So, if Jesus were saying these words to you, how do you hear it?

“Kathy, Kathy, you are worried and distracted by many things; maybe there is need of only one thing, or another option, at least for now. What might that be?” That’s a bit of a paraphrase, mashing up the translations we discussed – but I think you can see the point of letting Jesus speak to you through these words.

What time are you in, in your own Christian life? What is it that you have ignored, set aside, or what is worrying you, distracting you? Is this a time of listening and learning, or a time of ministry to others? Isn’t Lent the perfect time for such reflection? Think about the season of your faith and what you might be called to do or how to be. As you continue to reflect on Martha’s frustration, does it mirror your own? Do you need to step back and reflect on the reason you are

serving, and would a time of listening help you to refocus on the 'why' of what you are actively doing? We aren't called into an either/or choice over faith and works; we are called to do both, at the time God calls us to do them. Jesus counsels each of us in this story. So, insert your name into this question: " \_\_\_\_\_ , there is only one thing worth being concerned about. You need to discover it. What might that be?" This Lenten season, sit with that question. Jesus is speaking to you. Listen. Amen.