

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Pentecost 6  
July 21, 2019

## **Pay Attention to Your Inner Martha and Mary Luke 10:38-42**

The story Luke tells in today's scripture passage is familiar to many of us, as is the conventional conclusion about it: Be Mary, not Martha. That is, don't just keep busy when you should be meditating or spending deep time with God.

But let's look at the story more carefully and see if that's really what it's saying. Let's see, in other words, whether we can rescue Martha from history's dustbin.

First, however, we must understand the backstory. Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus weren't just passing acquaintances with Jesus but close friends. They were, in fact, so close that when Jesus heard Lazarus had died, he wept openly. And then he brought Lazarus back to life after several days in the tomb. Speaking of that miracle, someone once wrote a funny poem about the Lazarus story in which Lazarus discovers, after he comes back to life, that life has moved on. His sisters already have rented out his room, sold his dog and put his collection of recorded music up for sale on eBay. Dead is dead, after all. Well, unless we're dealing with Jesus.

By the way, if the account of Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary found in John 12:1-8 is of the same visit as this one in Luke 10 (and I am assuming it is), then Lazarus is sitting at the table with Jesus. Imagine that. He'd been dead. Now he's going to have some falafel and rice — or whatever Martha is in the kitchen fixing.

At any rate, think about what you know and love about close friends. One thing for sure is that we can speak honestly to them and they will still know that we love them. And they can speak honestly to us without threatening our relationship with them.

And isn't speaking honestly just what Jesus is doing with Martha? He's not telling her to change the way she lives and how she approaches life. He's not insisting that she change her Myers-Briggs classification from an ENFP to an ISTJ (Google it, kids) or telling her to become a contemplative. Rather, he's asking her in these particular circumstances to pay attention to what's happening right in front of her — just as Mary is doing. To better understand Mary's actions, let's read John's account of that same visit.

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.*

*Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

John wants us to see here that Mary was so humble and dedicated to Jesus that she would spare no expense to honor him. Mary thus sets an example for all of Christ's disciples, then and now, as she focuses on what is happening at each particular moment.

And what exactly is happening? Jesus is on his way to die. It's six days before Passover, and at the end of several trying years of ministry, Jesus knows he's facing the cross. It's not a cross he's eager to accept, but it's one he knows is waiting. Facing execution by the state can concentrate the mind, can give you a heavy heart.

Let's not rush by this part of the story. Let's ask a foundational question: Why is Jesus on his way to die? He's on that path because of the astonishing reality of the incarnation and how Jesus chose to live as a human being. The incarnation, the human embodiment of God in Jesus, meant that the limitless power source of the universe freely chose absolute submission.

Infinite authority bowed to the human condition to show us how to live, now and eternally, and to be at the center of God's plan to redeem not just humanity but all creation. And that infinite authority paid a dear price for that decision.

This story of Mary and Martha gives us a good opportunity to appreciate anew the incarnation, which author Jack Miles, in his book *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*, calls "Christianity's breathtaking addition to Judaism's already long list of divine self-contradictions." As Miles notes, the God that the Jewish people introduced to the world is, unlike Greek gods and gods proposed by others, "alone in the cosmos, sexless, fatherless, motherless and ... childless." This God had to choose to become the parent of a child by assuming human form.

Jesus, of course, being what the church has long called both fully human and fully divine, understands all that deeply and feels it in his very human, exhausted body. So, all Jesus wants is to sit quietly among close friends and let them hold him, ministering to his bruised life. Mary gets that.

But Martha? She's bustling around fixing food that Jesus is in no mood to eat. She's setting the table, polishing the silver, shining the crystal, arranging flowers for the centerpiece. It's her way of coping, and it's perhaps driving Jesus a little nuts.

Martha hasn't done what our Buddhist friends tell us we should always do, and that is to be mindful, to pay attention, to notice. Had she been mindful, she would have seen what Mary saw — a despondent man faced with a terrible choice he's already made: Should he move inexorably toward the cross and the work God sent him to do, or should he try to save his own life?

Jesus isn't much interested in polished silverware, in hors d'oeuvres, in chit-chat about the pennant race. Jesus is looking death in the face, and nothing else matters.

He tells Martha that Mary has chosen "the better part." Some translations call it "the good part." And what is it? I think we can find a good answer in Matthew 6:33, where Jesus tells his followers to seek first the kingdom and righteousness of God. Mary did that by focusing on her relationship with the one in whom God was incarnate.

But Jesus doesn't tell Martha to become someone else. He simply notes that she seems worried and distracted. He invites her to slow down, breathe, pay attention to the moment.

Jesus certainly knows that he and others need people who pay attention to detail, who are on top of things, who are hospitable and organized.

So, Martha should remain Martha. But being a detail-oriented person, an organizer, doesn't mean ignoring the needs of people in your company when those needs have nothing to do with serving dinner on time. Rather, when people need a pause, some silence and the comfortable presence of friends, the Martha in us must make way for the Mary in us. For the moment. The Martha in us can get back to the detail work later. That work will still be there.

And, truth be told, much of the time the world needs the Martha in us at least as much as it needs the Mary. But when we get out of balance one way or the other, we lose our way.

There's one other thing about Martha that I want us to notice in this story. When she had a complaint, an issue, she knew right where to go. She took it straight to Jesus, asking, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

This is a model for us, even when our complaint, our issue, results from our own misunderstanding. As the old hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" says, we can "take it to the Lord in prayer." Martha could have just mumbled under her breath or griped to others helping in the kitchen. But she made sure that both Mary and Jesus heard what was on her mind.

And Jesus answered her without any resentment that she had bothered him with her grievance.

When we store up grudges and complaints, we injure ourselves. Speaking about such matters to the people involved and to God is a much healthier way to proceed. Martha teaches us that.

She also teaches us to focus first on Jesus. It's the path to peace, to understanding, even to salvation. So, as we try to be as mindful, comforting and loving as Mary, let's also give thanks for what Martha has called to our attention because she was courageous enough to speak out.

Jesus is waiting to hear what's on your mind, whether grievance or praise. And others are waiting to have their own needs noticed and responded to the way Mary did. Let's be both Martha and Mary, depending on which one is needed. Your inner Mary and inner Martha will thank each other, and Jesus will respond in truth and love. May it be so.