

There's Something about Mary (in a Martha World)  
Sermon on Luke 10:38-42 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, July 22, 2007

This is one of those sermons where I had best proceed with caution, if not outright fear and trepidation. I say this because our text concerns two sisters, and I am not, nor have I ever been, a sister. I am the older brother of two younger sisters, and considering that I am given to a certain absent-mindedness and a propensity to see the world through rose-colored glasses, I have not closely observed the relationship between sisters generally. I have been led to understand that my own sisters' relationship was not always one of mutual respect, unflagging patience, and loving kindness, devoid of all rancor and competition.

I suspect the same was true of the sisters Martha and Mary. Given what we know about these women from two different Gospel traditions, we can venture some assumptions about their personalities: Perhaps the older, and certainly the more dominant of the two, Martha is assertive, even bold, for "inviting men to come in [to her home] is almost inconceivable in Palestine."<sup>1</sup> Yet Martha was quite conventional—if not downright conservative—as regards cultural mores. The social conditions of the day stipulated that a woman's place was in the home, and her responsibilities were to provide for her household. As a householder, Martha accepted those strictures and fulfilled her tasks with aplomb. We often encounter her overseeing one dinner party or another. Little wonder, then, that she is the patron saint of cooks and housewives, artistically represented in homely dress with a cooking utensil or set of keys in hand.

Mary, by contrast, though less assertive than her sister, was nevertheless independent-minded and something of a free spirit. She was keenly intuitive and sensitive to the needs of others. On those occasions when Jesus visited their home, Mary would wait and watch Jesus,

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<sup>1</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984) 188.

following his lead, opening up to him in ways other people—her sister included—deemed inappropriate. It was Mary who had wept with Jesus over her brother’s death and she who had anointed Jesus’ feet with costly perfume and dried them with her hair. Though Martha had always welcomed him and offered him generous hospitality, it was Mary who seemed to share an especially close relationship, even an intimacy, with Jesus. There was something about Mary.

Something that, on those occasions when Jesus did visit, probably tempted her sister to think unkind thoughts and use impolite names under her breath. This visit was just such an example. Jesus and his disciples were making their way to Jerusalem when they came to the village where the sisters made their home. Martha invited Jesus to come in and to join them for a meal, and then, like an artful hostess, graciously excused herself and disappeared to supervise the preparations. As Jesus sat in the living room, surrounded by his disciples and some of Martha’s guests, Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying” (Lk. 10:39).

Like independent-minded, free-spirited women after her, Mary caused something of a ruckus just for wanting to be with the boys. Simply by sitting there at Jesus’ feet, Mary was violating an important cultural taboo. To sit at someone’s feet is code for being a disciple, and being a disciple was man’s work in a man’s world. To sit at someone’s feet did not mean to look up or be devoted to a person like that person was a rock star or movie idol. It meant instead to place oneself in a position to listen and learn, to focus on the master’s teaching. With very few exceptions, rabbis did not allow women to sit at their feet, to be their students, and no real rabbi would consent to teach a woman. So “for a woman to settle comfortably among the men was bordering on scandalous. ... Only a shameless woman would behave in such a way.”<sup>2</sup>

I can only imagine what Martha said to herself when she saw Mary across that invisible, but very clear social boundary line, and I don’t think I could repeat it in this venue. It was

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 130.

probably something to the effect of: “That lazy, shiftless sister of mine, always poking her nose where it doesn’t belong. Why can’t she ever remember her place? Why can’t she get herself here in the kitchen where she belongs? Here we are, entertaining the Lord of heaven and earth, and she can’t pull herself away even to set the table.”

Poor Martha. Many of us know how she feels. Ours is a Martha world, and this may be true especially for women. Joy Douglas Strome says

Today’s Martha could be working at a computer, checking her Blackberry or talking on her cell phone while driving and eating lunch. She could be on a treadmill while making appointments for the next day. She could be grading papers, her phone held between cheek and shoulder, checking in with family about coming home late. She could be trying to have a business meeting in the middle of a crowded airplane while juggling a watery cup of Coke. She could have a baby on one hip and a textbook for night class on the other. She could be receiving chemotherapy on her lunch hour and trying like crazy to save her job. She could be overscheduled, overbooked, and overwhelmed.<sup>3</sup>

Overwhelmed would be a good way to describe Martha, so overwhelmed in fact, that she was literally being pulled in every different direction by her responsibilities. When he translated this verse, John Wesley explained that, “The Greek word properly signifies to be drawn different ways at the same time, and admirably expresses the situation of a mind, surrounded (as Martha’s then was) with so many objects of care, that it hardly knows which to attend to first.”<sup>4</sup>

Overworked, tired, frustrated, and not a little hurt, Martha comes to Jesus for some sympathy and a little help. “Lord,” she asks, “do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me” (10:40). Providing hospitality for guests was both a privilege and an obligation. Jesus himself had sent out his disciples, telling them to accept such hospitality as was offered them in the towns and villages they visited. Being the perfect

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<sup>3</sup> Joy Douglas Strome, “Living by the Word: Kitchen Relief,” *The Christian Century* July 10, 2007, vol. 124, no. 7, p.18.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, Luke X.40.

hostess demanded careful attention to detail: Martha had to clean the house, wash the dishes, prepare the meal, invite the neighbors, arrange the decorations, and hire the band. When Jesus arrived, Martha welcomed him into her home. Could she take his coat? Would he like a drink? Someone should wash his feet. Perhaps he would like to take a tour of the house? With the Lord at her home, there was so much to do: get out the good china, see that the table was set properly, make sure there would be enough wine, check on the roast one more time, keep the gravy at just the right temperature.

All the while, Jesus is in the living room teaching his disciples and Mary is there with them, taking her place beside them, learning to be a disciple like all the rest. Martha's protest to Jesus is "reasonable" and "justifiable."<sup>5</sup> As much as she herself might like to be at Jesus' feet, Martha had other things to do—so many things to do that she got distracted by her serving others. In fact, she is "so busy serving she does not hear the word."<sup>6</sup> And that is the problem.

Luke has made listening to Jesus a major theme of his Gospel. Simon and his fishing partners heard and obeyed Jesus' word when he commanded them concerning their fishing (5:4-6). The Sermon on the Plain is delivered "in the hearing of the people" (7:1). One aspect of Jesus' miraculous work of healing is that "the deaf hear" (7:22). The parable of the sower and the seeds is explained in terms of those who hear the word and how they act subsequently (8:11-15). Jesus instructs his disciples to "pay attention to how [they] listen" (8:18). Perhaps most significantly, Jesus describes his family as those people "who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21). Discipleship, then, is defined as first hearing God's Word and second acting accordingly. Because she is distracted by her tasks, Martha is unable to fix her attention on hearing the word.

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<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 152; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, New Interpreters Bible vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 231.

<sup>6</sup> Craddock, *ibid.*

We may sympathize with Martha because she is doing the right thing and a good thing: she is serving and providing hospitality to others, including the Lord himself. But even these holy obligations have distracted Martha from what is truly important, the “one thing” that is needed: to stop for just a moment, to lay aside all the activities, and listen to the word of God.

This is not in any way meant to make us feel guilty. We live in a Martha world. We have business to transact and appointments to keep and phone calls to return. We have to run to get the dry cleaning and take the dog to the vet and pick up dinner on the way home. Even church activities can keep us hopping: Bible study, choir practice, Sunday school party, potluck supper on August 5<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the Vision for Change. But there’s something about Mary in a Martha world: a determination to leave behind our cares and concerns in order to sit at Jesus’ feet. A peace that comes from spending time listening to Jesus and focusing on his word. An assurance that in choosing to be a disciple, Mary has “chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (10:42). To sit in the presence of God when the world wants us up and running; to be single-minded in our devotion to Christ when the world offers so many distractions; to commit ourselves entirely to hearing Jesus speak to us when other voices claim our attention, is gift and grace divine. Worship is gift. Prayer is gift. Bible study, meditation, Communion—all of them means of grace—are gift. Mary has chosen the better part. Have you?