

In Praise of Martha

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

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Some of us relate easily to Mary who loved to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen while he talked. Others of us relate better to Martha who preferred to work for Jesus while all the talking was going on. But Mary and Martha are sisters. And we can't understand either one of them if we don't remember that they are related.

The Gospel writer Luke begins this wonderful story by telling us that Jesus, "entered a certain village." I love that about the Gospels. They always make it clear that Jesus isn't a detached teacher of God-consciousness. He is the Savior who enters into particular places, like the places where you live and work. On this particular day Luke is describing, Jesus entered a particular village and went into a particular home where a particular family lived.

As Jesus began to talk, or maybe teach, Mary, one of the sisters who lived in the home, sat at his feet and absorbed every word. But the other sister Martha, the one who greeted Jesus at the door, was busily at work while all the men, and her sister Mary, were listening to Jesus. We can imagine her in the kitchen banging the pots a little more loudly than necessary as she fumed over her sister Mary. Finally, she just couldn't take it anymore. So she rushed into the living room and started an argument. "Jesus, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all of the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Now don't you think this particular home has heard this particular argument before? Oh yeah. I'm thinking that these sisters had this argument pretty much their whole lives.

I have a set of twin aunts names Mary and Martha. It is almost as if Luke wrote the script for their lives. My Aunt Martha is a hard working, highly educated, successful woman, with a huge house. By contrast, my Aunt Mary lives in an apartment, runs a day care center for children, and always gives her heart away easily. Now these two women love each other intensely. So intensely that they argue a lot. Maybe daily. But they can't imagine life without each other. I can't remember even seeing one of them without the other nearby. Also, I've never heard them call each other by name. Instead they just refer to each other as "Sister," as a constant rehearsal of their cherished, stormy relationship.

The family of Jesus Christ, known as the church, also has Marys and Marthas in it. Those who are like Mary love to worship, to behold the beauty of God, to pray and contemplate the love of Jesus. And they tear up easily when they read the paper or hear about things that break their hearts easily. By contrast, when those of us who are like Martha hear about problems, we get to work. Marthas keep volunteering to do things around the church and community because, well, somebody has to get the work done. But Marthas also love Jesus. I work closely enough with them to be absolutely convinced of that, and it is through their work that they say, "I love you," to Jesus.

The problem that Marthas have is that they just can't understand how those Marys can love Jesus without doing some of the work. So an old family argument resumes. "Pastor, tell them that they ought to be serving on our committee. Tell them to be more involved in missions. Make them sign up to do more than they're doing. Pastor, are you just going to let them sit there and listen to you week after week? That's not fair. That's not even fair to them. They need to mature in their love and become a worker." Well, I think Martha may have a point. And so does Mary.

Fortunately one day, Jesus enters into this particular argument. And notice carefully what he does. He doesn't try to negotiate a compromise. Nor does he take a side in the argument. Instead he does turn all his attention on Martha, which in itself is striking. Anytime Jesus gives his attention to someone he gives pure love. Out of his love for Martha he gives her not what she wants, a rebuke of Mary, but he gives Martha a reminder of what is most important. That is because whenever any family is caught up in an old argument, they have forgotten what is most important. What is most important for Martha to remember is that she is related to Mary. She is related not by just biology, but by her soul.

There is a Mary and a Martha living in each of us. One of them may be more dominant than the other, but that only means that you have to nurture the other part of you. For both Mary and Martha are necessary to a healthy soul.

What Jesus is correcting in Martha is not her activism, but her inability to be inspired by her hard work. Typically when someone refers to this passage, we hear a lot of Martha-bashing, as if to say, "She just doesn't get it." But I'm not so sure. Martha may have been listening closely to some of Jesus' clear teaching about service. This text follows Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. Where he criticized all of the Mary-like priests and Levites who rushed by a man in need in order to get to worship. Earlier in the same chapter Luke tells us that Jesus said, "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." Over and over Jesus said things like, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things I tell you." The last thing Jesus is going to tell any Martha is to stop serving. So in solidarity with all the Marthas in the kingdom I say, "Stop bashing the hard workers. We need them."

No, Jesus isn't condemning Marthas. Rather it is out of concern for those who have obeyed the call to work and serve that he wants them to attend to the Mary-like part of their souls that lie dormant. That's the part that knows how to simply sit at Jesus feet.

The Lord responded to Martha's complaint by saying, "Martha, Martha..." (Remember when your parents would say your name twice? If they said your full name that meant you were in trouble. "Michael Craig Barnes you get in here and clean up this room!" But when they said, "Craig, Craig," that meant they were lovingly trying to explain I was confused.) "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away." Here Jesus is affirming not so much Mary, but the better part that Mary chose.

The better part -- that's what we Marthas lose sight of. Life has so many parts, doesn't it? There is the part about our responsibility at home to people who are counting on us. There is the part about our responsibility at work, at church, PTA, and coaching soccer. There is the part about our responsibility to friends, aging parents, and to being an informed voter. Sometimes it seems like we keep accumulating more and more parts to life, more and more responsibilities, and the pieces of pie keep getting sliced smaller and smaller, which permit less and less time with all of them. Before long we don't feel like we are doing a very good job at any of these particular parts. That is when we start to burn out. And that is when Jesus ever-so-tenderly says, "Martha, Martha. Keep your focus on the better part."

To attend to the Jesus part of your life is to join Mary at Jesus' feet where your soul is nurtured in God's intense love for you. We Marthas do not serve Jesus in order to love him. We serve because we have become convinced that he loves us. And the only way to be convinced of that is to begin each day at his feet, listening to his words as you read the Bible and praying, just because it is good to be in his presence.

In a wonderful book titled *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard has reminded us that everything in this world that has life needs the right environment to stay alive. Whether it's a cabbage or a water buffalo, it won't survive outside the proper environment. Since you have been created with a soul, you will not survive apart from a spiritual environment. That environment is a very particular place -- at the feet of Jesus. That is where you discover the "better part" of your life, which then becomes the "one thing." At Jesus' feet everything else disappears. Everything else is relinquished into the hands of the Savior. The reason we need to spend time every morning at Jesus' feet is because if you are like me, you spent the last day busily trying to take responsibility again for everything you relinquished to Jesus the day before. But day by day, year by year, at the feet of Jesus, the Mary-like quality comes alive in our souls. Before long, all the parts of our lives are united, integrated, by the one Savior for it all.

As Jesus warned Martha, we will eventually lose all the other parts of life anyway. Only the better part will not be taken away. So the only way to keep the things that you are working to save is to lay them at the feet of Jesus today.

Forgive us, O God, for making any part of our lives better than your love, the one thing, the only thing that can hold all the other parts together. Amen.