

“Choosing the Better Part”
Based on Luke 10: 38-42
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church— July 18, 2010

This text reminds me of one of my favorite bumper sticker slogans: don’t just do something, sit there! We live in a society where “doing” is highly valued. Those who get a lot of stuff done (or at least appear to) are highly esteemed and there seems to be an unspoken understanding that “busy” is synonymous with “important.” So it’s not terribly surprising that many people dislike this story. Many are offended by this text; on the other hand, those among us who are less “do-ers,” those who are not “type A personalities,” those who fall more toward P than J on the Myers-Briggs scale, like to point to this story for vindication.

And really, who among us does not sympathize with Martha? Even those of us who would be more apt to be with Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet recognize that it doesn’t seem fair for Martha to be doing all the work while Mary has all the fun. I’m reminded of one Thanksgiving when I was a teenager I voluntarily did all the dishes then felt sorry for myself (and I don’t remember exactly, but I probably even had a bit of an outburst) because I felt unappreciated “slaving away” while the others sat around visiting and enjoying themselves. Many of us can’t help but wonder how Jesus liked that meal Martha prepared which he wouldn’t have had if she, like Mary, had been sitting at his feet instead of working in the kitchen. Most of us are uncomfortable with the Jesus we encounter in this story and we’re uncomfortable about being uncomfortable. We don’t like it when Jesus contradicts our sense of what is fair.

This passage has been said to be both about uplifting the position of women in Christianity—like Mary, women are allowed to be theologians and disciples of Christ. Or the opposite—some scholars believe that the text was used *against* women serving, with Jesus saying that women were supposed to be passive in their faith like Mary and not active like Martha. But interpretations of this text as being all about the roles of women are red herrings. The story could just as easily been about two men.

Most of our discomfort with this story comes from misreading the text. First of all, we see this situation as a zero-sum game: with one win (Mary) and one loss (Martha). But it’s not. It’s not about who is better: Martha or Mary. It’s not about what form of devotion is better: service or contemplation. In these five short verses we only see a snapshot of Mary and Martha but they are not one-dimensional people and, like us, they didn’t live one-dimensional lives only ever doing one thing: either *only* serving or *only* sitting around praying, studying and thinking about God.

A friend of mine says, “I wish Jesus had said, ‘you know Martha, you’re right. Why don’t we ALL help with the work and then we can all sit and talk.’” But this scripture isn’t about housework or division of labor. However this solution does touch on an important aspect of the text: it’s not a dichotomy of either service or contemplation; it’s not either/or; it’s both/and. Neither the church nor individuals can effectively have

all one or all the other. Activism without prayer and thought becomes aimless and unproductive. Contemplation and intellectual pursuits without application are equally meaningless. Martha's mistake is not service—service is extremely important throughout the Bible. Service is praised and Jesus uses the same word for himself as a servant. Jesus himself serves. Likewise, hospitality cannot be her mistake, as hospitality is also highly valued throughout the Bible and particularly in Luke's gospel.

So if service and hospitality are not Martha's mistake, then what is? Martha's errors are in her complaint, her distraction, her anxiousness, and surprisingly, her lack of hospitality—all components of a lack of honest discipleship. The first key is distraction. The text says that Martha was "distracted by her many tasks," and Jesus also tells her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things." A few months ago, I was preparing for a dinner at my house. I spent a ridiculous amount of time setting and decorating the table. I knew there were more urgent, more important things that I should have been doing but I just couldn't stop myself from obsessing over the table settings. And perhaps this is the kind of distraction that Martha fell victim to. We tend to assume that the work that Martha was doing was necessary. We assume she was making the dinner or cleaning up afterwards. But the text doesn't give any indication what she was doing. Perhaps she was obsessing over the table settings, or cleaning the kitchen cabinets and drawers or doing something that really could wait and did not have to be done right at that moment. As New Testament scholar Matthew Skinner notes, "The verb rendered 'distracted' (*perispaomai*) in verse 40 refers to drawing away or diverting something. Criticizing Mary (and, subtly, Jesus) for leaving her alone, Martha insinuates value judgments upon the different activities the sisters choose to perform. This reveals that her practices of hospitality are eclipsing their purpose." Skinner concludes, "Hospitality that is 'anxious and troubled' (v. 41 my trans.) loses its focus, which is Jesus, who is Lord and guest."¹ Martha is so distracted by the busy-ness of hospitality that she is not actually being hospitable. She has lost focus on her guest. She has lost focus on Jesus.

Another mistake Martha makes is in her complaint. Her complaint to Jesus puts him, the guest, in an uncomfortable position of choosing one host over the other. Add to that the subtle accusation of Jesus for allowing or condoning Mary's unfair behavior and we find that Martha isn't quite the ideal hostess she sets herself up to be. What was Martha hoping for by complaining to Jesus? Did she really expect Jesus to scold Mary and send her off to the kitchen? Or was she setting herself up as a martyr seeking attention from Jesus, wanting to make sure he notices just how hard working she is. I know that Thanksgiving all those years ago, I wasn't particularly upset that I was doing all the dishes by myself, I was mad that I wasn't getting what I considered the appropriate praise and thanks for doing it. Hospitality is supposed to be about serving one's guest and devotion to God is supposed to be about God. But here Martha's concerns seem to be primarily about herself. She says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left *me* to do all the work by *myself*? Tell her then to help *me*." The text is not about lifting up one form of devotion over another (service or contemplation); it's about one object of devotion—Jesus—and Martha has lost her focus, distracted by other things.

¹ Matthew L. Skinner, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 265, 267

Again, Martha's mistake isn't in the act of providing hospitality. Hospitality, sharing a meal in particular, is a prominent theme throughout Luke. Remember a few weeks ago we heard the story of Simon the Pharisee being rebuked for only giving mediocre hospitality when the woman came in and anointed Jesus. And just last week we heard about the Good Samaritan who Jesus lifted up as an example of how to behave, caring for others. That story ends with Jesus saying, "go and *do* likewise". So we know that Jesus doesn't have a problem with *doing* and hospitality in general. Jesus takes issue with the *way* Martha is providing hospitality, like Simon, less than fully. Jesus isn't promoting inaction.

Mary's focus on her guest, on Jesus and his teaching, is in itself a form of action. Jesus says that "there is need of only one thing" and he doesn't say exactly what that one thing is but he says that Mary has chosen it. Mary, who has welcomed him into the house and placed all her attention on him. Mary, has met Jesus with earnest hospitality. Likewise, we are called to welcome Jesus earnestly into our lives. Martha's hospitality was lacking in her distraction from her guest, in her seeking praise for herself, in putting Jesus in an uncomfortable position by asking him to judge and putting him in the middle, in criticizing Mary in front of a guest and even in criticizing him a bit. But the story could have just as easily gone the other way with Mary seeking condemnation of Martha for not doing what she was doing, for working instead of listening to Jesus. The story could have gone the other way if Mary tried to prove how devoted she was.

St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel at all times—if necessary use words." Father Thomas Ryan writes of a conversation he once had with university students.² He asked them, "What do you think God asks of each of us? What does God call us to be?" One student replied, "To be good news!" As the conversation continued, she explained, that it's not enough to read the Bible—the Good News—or even to memorize parts of it. She said that we are called not to simply be hearers of the Good News, but "to *be* good news, to be actualizers of it."

Ryan asked her what would being good news look like? She responded:

"Suppose...you run into your friend John in the supermarket while shopping. As you stand and talk, your experience of John is that he is tired and stressed. As he describes his life, the images of a treadmill comes to mind, accompanied by words like 'frenetic' or 'compulsive.' As you walk away, you think to yourself that it would be difficult to be with John for long periods of time. He is too intense, too serious, too driven.

"Later, on the street, you run into Mary and walk a couple of blocks together, chatting. She is patient at the stoplights, calm when someone brusquely crosses in front of her and cuts her off. As she tells you about her work, she sounds energized by what she does, laughs easily in recounting a recent episode, and has a cheerful word for the newsstand vendor on the corner. At the end of your day when you reflect on the

² Thomas Ryan, "Toward a Positive Spirituality of the Body," *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 28-29.

events that filled it, the two encounters with John and Mary come to mind. There's no question which of these two people was like an embodied tonic, a vitamin, good news."

When Ryan asked the group "how does Mary get to be that way?" They suggested a variety of ways Mary probably attends to her mind, body and soul, "she gets enough sleep, eats a balanced diet, exercises regularly, takes time for prayer and spends time with friends." In other words, this Mary, just like the Mary in the Biblical story, has chosen the better part in her hospitality and care for the image of God that is her body, in her prayer life, and in hospitality shared with friends. The friend John, is so busy he is probably unable to tend to the image of God that is his body, unable to show hospitality to himself, much less others, unable to put others at ease, because he like Martha, is distracted by many things and has not chosen the better part.

But choosing the better part is not only a lesson for us as individuals. We are also called, as a church to choose the better part. We, as a church family, have a lot of important business to attend to: the meetings, the fellowship events, the mission, the choir rehearsals and the money counting just to name a few. But when we lose our focus on the better part, when we lose focus on God, the business of the church becomes busy-ness. We become distracted from genuine discipleship, falling into the Martha trap.

Likewise, I doubt there's much risk of it happening in this congregation, but if we as a church were to turn exclusively to contemplation, all prayer and study and worship and no action, we would not be choosing the better part as we would be ignoring the call to "go and do;" to be the Good News.

In truth, my friend who wishes Jesus said, "let's all do the dishes together and then talk together" isn't too far off. This text is not setting up a dichotomy between service and prayer and study, both are necessary, both are forms of devotion and both need to be honored—but both must be pursued with a focus on God not in anxiety of distractedness, forgetting that God is the reason for doing it. Both the serving and the contemplation are important. We are called to both. And to have one without the other is to be distracted. Ability to serve with a focus on God is to choose the better part.