

## The Better Part

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In today's text Jesus messes with our stereotypes. This text has a history in our lives, and for some, a history of hurt. Some, especially women, have felt stereotyped and put in a box. Some who have identified with "Martha" have felt put down. But Jesus is rearranging not reinforcing cultural stereotypes.

There is more, however, going on, and it has to do with where Luke has placed this story: right after the parable of the Good Samaritan. Both have to do with what Jesus called the greatest commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself". The Good Samaritan has to do with the love of neighbor. Today's story has to do with loving God wholly.

Through the Good Samaritan Jesus points to the love of neighbor and says "Do this and you will live...Go and likewise." Through the Mary/Martha story Jesus points to the love of God and says, "Sit, listen and learn." The famous Rabbi Akiba wrote: "Every section of scripture is explained by the one that stands next to it." So we read them together, and today's special message is "Love God *too!*"

As the story is told, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem and stops by the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. And Martha welcomes him into her home. *Her* home. She must have been the leader of the household. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendle describes her as a “competent extrovert.”<sup>1</sup>

Their home was in Bethany, near Jerusalem; Jesus often stopped there. It was his “home away from home”, where the one who had no place to lay his head could lay his head. They were “family” to him, close friends. Martha met him at the door, her face beaming, and welcomed him in. In that day such hospitality was a sacred act. This she was doing.

## II

After Jesus entered the house, Martha went into the kitchen and began her final preparations for the meal. Jesus went into the main room. Mary came and sat down at his feet “listening to his teaching.” This was the traditional posture of a male student learning from the master.

Here is the first of the stereotypes Jesus messes with. There was a traditional space in the home for women—the kitchen. And there was the traditional space for the man—the main room where the men sat and conversed. Mary had entered the male space, and Jesus welcomed her there. He was welcoming her as a *disciple*, a role only allowed then to men.

Luke has underscored this revolution-in-the making earlier in Luke, chapter 8 (8:1-3), where he described Jesus calling women into his circle of disciples. Joanna, wife of Chuza, King Herod's steward—there must have been quite a story there! And Suzanna and Mary Magdalene. These women traveled with him and supported him “out of their means.”

Now we see Mary assuming the role of disciple, sitting at the rabbi's feet, listening and learning. She had entered the man's space and assumed a male role.

### III

Now the tension begins to build. Martha was in the kitchen furiously, and I mean furiously, preparing the meal. She was as the text puts it, “distracted with much serving.” The word for serving is *diakonos*, from which we get the word “deacon.” Literally it means “to go through the dust” to serve someone, as a waiter waiting tables, or a nurse emptying bed pans. But Mary is *frazzled* with all she has to do. Have you been there? Scriptures say, “Be not weary in well doing.” But we *do* get weary some days. Very weary.

So she marched into the room where Jesus and Mary were and said, “Master do you not care that my sister has left me to do all this work alone? Tell her to help me!” Such a domestic scene has been replayed a million and one times through the years.

## IV

Well, at this point we need to get a larger, longer picture of Martha. I come to her defense. First of all, she was the one who graciously welcomed him into her home. And this: how would you like your whole life judged by one bad day, one upset moment? We've all had days like "Alexander's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day."

And look at the picture of Martha we get in John's gospel. Jesus had heard that their brother Lazarus had fallen deathly ill. Jesus went to Bethany to be with them. When Martha heard he was near she went out and met him on the road. First, she let out her grief, for her brother had died: "Master, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Then she expressed her faith in him: "Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." And then, she uttered the supreme confession of faith in John's gospel:

I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world (John 11:27).

In Matthew, Mark and Luke it is *Peter* who makes the supreme confession of faith. In John, it is *Martha*. She, too, had sat at Jesus' feet and learned from him.

In medieval Christian art Martha is painted bedecked in armor and slaying the dragon. Not St. George, *St. Martha*. So let's give Martha a break

## V

Jesus then said to her, “Martha, Martha.” We do not know the tone of his voice. I do not believe it was a scolding, patronizing calling of her name, but an intimate compassionate, endearing calling of her name. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; there is need of only one thing.”

In the Buddhist tradition they speak of the “ten thousand things” which can distract us and clutter our minds and our days. Do you know what I mean by “the ten thousand things?” Do they consume your days? There is need of only one, Jesus said.

You may remember the movie *City Slickers* where Billy Crystal in mid-life crisis goes to a dude ranch to try to figure things out. He takes up with a crusty old cowboy played by Jack Palance. In a key scene the Jack Palance character says: “You know what the secret of life is? One thing, just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don’t mean *nothing*.” (Though he didn’t use the word “nothing.”)

Billy Crystal says, “Yes, but what’s that one thing?”

The cowboy answers: “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

It is crucial to figure out what's most important in your life and orient your life around that.

## VI

One way to reflect on this passage is to examine *balance* in the Christian life. There's a *Mary* in us, and there is a *Martha* in us. We need to balance these two parts of ourselves. We could call it the balance between Active Spirituality and Contemplative Spirituality. The Church of the Savior termed it "Journey Inward, Journey Outward."

In this duality Martha is the Doer, Mary is the Mystic. Martha is the Activist and Mary is the Contemplative. There is a *doing* part of the Christian life and there is a *being* part. Gordon Cosby, founding pastor of the Church of the Savior in Washington D.C., would always remind his congregation of doers: We are "human *beings*" not "human *doings*". Start with being, the interior dimension. (They would often begin their "Servant Leadership School" reading *Life of the Beloved*, by Henri Nouwen. You *are* God's beloved!)

In the Iona Abby on the island of Iona if you walk down the aisle and stop at the altar in front of the altar window and look to your right you see two animal figures carved out of stone on each side of the window to the right. On one side is

a *cat*; on the other side is a *monkey*. The cat symbolized contemplative spirituality, the monkey symbolized active spirituality. We need both.

The monastic life, as it developed in the West, had a motto which governed their daily life: *Ora et Labora*. Prayer and Work. The monk devoted his day to both work and prayer. As to the life of prayer, Thomas Merton, America's most famous monk, wrote that we need "enough silence and solitude" to "enable the deep inner voice" of our "true self to be heard at least occasionally." And as we listen to the scriptures he wrote, "a certain interior silence" is required. In this silence we "let go of [our] congested, habitual thoughts and preoccupations so that [we] can freely open the heart to the sacred text."

Is there an imbalance in our lives and in the life of the church in which we can grow distracted by our much serving and forget to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen? We can be all about the love of neighbor and neglect the love of God.

## VII

I think Jesus had this in mind when he said to Martha: "She has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her." The first meaning of these words is in support of Mary having chosen the part of being a disciple, a role formerly assigned to men only. Listen again. "*She* has chosen the better part and *it will not be taken from her*." "She has *chosen* the better part." She is free to

*choose.*” She has chosen the *better part.*” He is making a value judgement here. Every text has its imbalance, its disproportion, and we must let it stand! In the parable of the good Samaritan it was “Do this.” In today’s test it is “Devote yourself to the love of God.”

We hear a lot in church about God’s love for *us*. We hear less about our love of *God*. At the Church Retreat there was much conversation about all the ways we might as a church love our neighbor. This was very exciting for me. But there was also conversation about how to develop the interior life. Toward that end, we are planning a spiritual retreat for the church in the fall.

How do we love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength? We do it every week in Sunday worship. We gather, we sing our love and praise to God. We offer God our thanksgiving. We bare our deepest selves to God in prayer. We listen for the voice of God in scripture and sermon, in and amid the words and the silences. We carry on our long conversation with Jesus. We hold hands. We love God in each other. We become Mary.

And we do so in our private lives too. We walk in the woods and love God in nature. We do so as we listen to music, or read a book, or write our thoughts on paper. We go inward.



The challenge is to find the ways that work best for us. I know one busy mother who gave up trying to have a 30 minute prayer time once a day and discovered how to pray all through the day carrying reminders, symbols, prompts that guided her inner life. Some make gratitude lists. Others turn off the T.V. long enough to think about God, and be with God. (Could we make the 46 days of Lent this year a time to be *Mary*? To sit and be still and listen to the voice of Jesus?)

Jesus said Mary had chosen the *better part*. Maybe because it is the most neglected part. Maybe because we need in our love of neighbor to recover its center in the love of God.

So here is how I would sum up today's text and today's sermon. I've written four lines, like the four lines of a song.

We worry about the many things

The things that must be done.

But Jesus gently sets the mark,

Choose the better part.

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1. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendle, *The Women Around Jesus* (N.Y. Crossroads, 1982), pp 17 ff.