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Luke 10:38-42

## WRESTLING MATCH

There are some scripture passages I really don't like to preach about. And today's story about Martha and Mary is one of them. My struggle with this passage over the course of this week brought to mind the story we heard from Genesis today—the story about Jacob wrestling all night with the stranger, who presumably is God. All week I have wrestled with this passage, looking for some angle that would give me the upper hand over a passage I find problematic. And yet, like Jacob in his own wrestling match, I cannot seem to prevail.

I'm sure I'm not alone in my irritation with this story and Jesus' response to Martha. Let's recall what is taking place in this story. Jesus and his group of 12 disciples have shown up in Martha and Mary's village. Martha extends hospitality by inviting Jesus to dinner. We have to assume that all the other disciples were included in that invitation as well. So now, Martha has a big crowd of men on her hands. True, she invited them. But it will take work to feed all those men. The dinner won't prepare itself. Someone has to do it.

But there sits her sister Mary at Jesus' feet with all the other disciples, listening to him teach. And Martha gets upset. She could use Mary's help. So Martha complains to Jesus. Maybe that wasn't the best move on her part. She probably should have gone to her sister and asked for help instead of dragging the honored guest into the family dispute. But not withstanding Martha's mistake, Jesus' answer lands pretty hard on a lot of our sensibilities. "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 from her."

Jesus' answer to Martha is a trigger for all the women who have felt that women's work has been historically unappreciated and diminished by men and by the Christian Church. Think about the work women have done—the cooking of meals, the cleaning of the house, the caring for children—so that the men can go out and do “real” work. Consider all the women who supported the monks and priests of the early Church, who prepared their meals, washed their clothes, cleaned their bathrooms—who in some traditions still do, so the male priests could do the important work of “real” ministry. Consider all the women whose efforts keep congregations going, who organize, and cook, and clean up from church dinners, whose efforts are too often taken for granted in the life of congregations. This is why Jesus' words to Martha trigger irritation in many women. This is why I have wrestled with this passage. And biblical scholars don't find this passage easy to interpret either, with one scholar saying one thing and the next one contradicting what the previous one just said.

Let me give you some examples.

A common interpretation of this passage in the history of the Christian Church is to understand it as elevating the contemplative life over that of the active life. Jesus praises Mary for her interest in attending to the Word of God whereas Martha is, as the text tells us, “distracted by her many tasks.” Is that really what this passage is telling us: that there is greater value in hearing over doing?

Such an interpretation is clearly *not* consistent with what we find in the gospels, or in the Gospel of Luke specifically. Let's remember that this story comes immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan—a story where Jesus praises the man who was active in doing ministry for another person in need. Throughout all the gospels, Jesus is himself active in healing,

feeding, caring for the people around him. So, the interpretation that the Mary and Martha story is about the value of contemplation and prayer over action doesn't hold water.

Perhaps, coming as it does after the parable of the Good Samaritan, we might wrestle from this story the idea that it is about the balance between action and contemplation. I could get behind that. But then there is this problematic statement Jesus makes: "Mary has chosen the *better* part." The better part. What to make of that?

Another interpretation of this story suggests that this passage was about the radical inclusion of a woman in a sphere typically occupied by men. Mary's posture of sitting at Jesus' feet was the posture of a student. And some scholars claim that since women were not allowed to be students of the Torah, the story reveals Jesus' radical inclusiveness. Now this was an interesting angle! Maybe I could finally wrestle something worthwhile from this text. My excitement was short-lived, however, because then I read another scholar who totally contradicted this interpretation, stating that women could certainly learn the Torah and listen to teachings from rabbis like Jesus. Oh bother!

So I turned my attention to the issue Jesus has with Martha: her distractibility. We are all easily distractible. Our lives are busy. Our schedules are full. We are on the go a lot. And it becomes easy to forget to pause and, as we are told in scripture: "to be still and know that I am God." And we are also so shaped by the values of this world that it becomes increasingly difficult to listen for God's voice amid all the other voices. We are distracted by the voices telling us to hold grudges and get even, when God tells us to forgive and seek reconciliation. We are distracted by the voices telling us to be suspicious of the stranger and the migrant, when God's voice is telling us to welcome the least and the forgotten. We are distracted by the ads beckoning us to want more and have more, when God's voice reminds us not to store up for

ourselves treasures on earth. Instead of attending to God's word with single-minded focus, we are distracted by other values. And maybe that is what Mary embodies in this story as she sat at Jesus' feet. Perhaps she embodies our need to focus intently on the Word of God.

And yet, consider what Martha was faced with—pulling off a big meal for a big crowd. Of course she was “distracted.” Coordinating such a meal is akin to a conductor managing all the sections of a symphony. There are many tasks that must be juggled all at the same time. It can be considered a work of art to pull off such a meal. And for these efforts in the kitchen to be characterized as “distractions” makes me bristle. The work of women is not a “distraction.” It is a ministry. Feeding people is a ministry—a ministry which takes effort, time, skill, and the ability to manage many tasks at the same time. Cleaning up from the dinner is a ministry. Caring for children is a ministry. Household work is a ministry.

But perhaps this story might invite us to consider *how* we carry out our ministries. Any of us, all of us, how do we offer our service? How do we strive to follow Christ? Is it with grumbling? Is it with impatience? Is it begrudgingly? Or are we serving others with genuine love in our hearts?

Have you ever found yourself doing that—offering your service in some way but being resentful the whole time you are doing it? I'm guilty of that. Is that what was going on with Martha? I wouldn't blame her. It would be understandable if she felt some resentment at being left to do all the work herself. And if that is true, could this be what Jesus was referring to when he said she was “distracted”? Was her resentment the source of the distraction? Instead of her heart being united around her gift of hospitality, could it be that she was divided by feelings of resentment and anger? And if so, what kind of a love gift to God or others is that?

This is not an easy passage for us to understand. But here is the message that is clearly being emphasized: the importance of attending to God's word. That is what Mary was doing. Focusing our whole selves around the Word of God imparts a kind of wisdom that can never be taken from us. It is now part of us: the way of compassion and love, the way of sharing and giving, the way of trying to forgive and working toward reconciliation, the way of knowing God is with us in and through all things, the way of being part of God's goodness while we are alive.

But every one of those insights is useless unless they are also put into action and lived out. And *that* is what Martha was doing.

Remember the Genesis story where Jacob wrestles all night with the man who is understood to be God? As the morning sun begins to rise over the horizon, Jacob tells the man that he will not let him go until he receives a blessing. Jacob might not prevail against his wrestling partner, but at the very least, he expects to wrestle from him a blessing. And that is sometimes the most we can expect from some biblical passages that disturb us. We may wrestle and wrestle to understand them and maybe never fully prevail in that quest. But at the least we strive to discover some kind of blessing. And who knows, maybe, maybe the wrestling itself is the blessing we receive as we strive to walk faithfully with the God of life.