

**Mary and Martha**  
**May 1, 2022**  
**Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright**

Jesus did not write down one word of his teachings, nor did he ask his disciples to write down what he taught. After Jesus's death many of the early Christians believed that the "last times" were at hand, and that Jesus would return soon, so, there was no need to write about Jesus's ministry, as the belief was that no future generations would be around to read books.

Somewhere in the 60s to 70s CE *The Gospel of Mark* is believed to have been written. By this time Christianity had moved from its Jewish origins To centering more on those who were gentiles. Mark's Gospel helped to spread Christianity among the gentiles. About ten to twenty years later we have *The Gospels of Matthew* and *The Gospel of Luke*, which offered more of the sayings of Jesus. *The Gospel of John* was written somewhere around 90 – 100 CE, with its unique interpretation of Jesus's life and ministry.

What is clear is that these Gospel writers preserved for all of time a memory of Jesus that did not vanish when the eyewitnesses to his life had died. The Gospel of Luke from which our scripture comes this morning is actually part of a two-volume work, Luke and Acts, which blends together a story of Jesus's ministry and the beginnings of the early Christian Church. Luke's two volume text covers over one quarter of the New Testament writings.

Who Luke was is not known for certain, but many scholars believe he was a physician who lived in the Greek city of Antioch in Syria. Other scholars view Luke as a Hellenistic Jew. We don't know if the audience to whom he was writing was solely gentile, or a community made up of both Jewish and gentile Christians. Today the evangelist Luke is venerated as a saint by the Catholic Church, and other Christian denominations.

Our scripture this morning is unique to Luke,

and believed to be his own creation.<sup>1</sup>  
Just prior to this passage about Mary and Martha,  
we have the famous story of the Good Samaritan,<sup>2</sup>  
in which a lawyer asks Jesus what one has to do to obtain eternal life.  
Jesus tells the lawyer to obey the first commandment: *to love God*.  
And with Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan,  
the second commandment is illustrated:  
*to love your neighbor as yourself*.<sup>3</sup>

In the story of Mary and Martha,  
Luke returns to the theme of the first commandment, *to love God*.  
Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus  
has her attention focused solely on her teacher.  
Luke's intention may have been to emphasize  
Through the story of Mary and Martha  
that we best follow the first commandment,  
believed to be spoken in ancient times by God,  
as found in the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy:  
*You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart,*  
*with all your soul, with all your energy, and with all your mind*.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the Gospel writer Luke  
is giving us instructions on the first and second commandments,  
in his two stories of The Good Samaritan and of Mary and Martha.  
He follows these two stories with his instructions  
on the Lord's Prayer for the early Christian communities.  
So, such is the context for our scripture of Mary and Martha this morning.

Who were Mary and Martha?  
They were two sisters who lived in Bethany along with their brother, Lazarus.  
Bethany was a village quite close to Jerusalem.  
Mary had known Jesus since he was a boy.<sup>5</sup>  
Mary or Miriam as she sometimes was called was almost sixty years old.  
Her sister Martha was older than she.  
Both sisters were widowed and struggled with the demands  
placed on their home of the visiting Jesus and his followers.  
Such a visit was considered an honor  
by those who were in sympathy with Jesus and his mission.

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<sup>1</sup> The Acts of Jesus. Robert Funk and The Jesus Seminar. 1998. p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10: 25-37

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:37

<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel of Matthew* 22: 37. Deuteronomy 6:5.

<sup>5</sup> *Rabbi Jesus*. Bruce Chilton, 2000, p, 236

Martha were beset with the demands of having to prepare food and feed so many who had arrived expectantly.

Jesus, breaking away from traditional Judaism, would invite his disciples to share in a holy feast. Most likely Martha was trying to prepare for the disciples such a sacred meal, as a symbol of a holy banquet with God.

Both women, Mary and Martha, were disciples of Jesus. The place of women in Jesus's movement was as disciples, not as servants. Women could share in these sacred meals. The figure of Mary in Luke's story reveals that at least he and perhaps Jesus as well saw women as equal in the Kingdom to come. Mary thus, in this visit, was able to share in Jesus's teachings on wisdom and his love of his God.

On the other hand, Martha's situation shows us that a woman disciple could be placed in an exhausting role. Martha was very tired from preparing food for so many people. Luke tells us that their number was around seventy people who all descended at once upon their Bethany household!<sup>6</sup> It would be like one of us preparing food for our entire congregation all by oneself.

It's not at all difficult for us to understand Martha's request for Mary to help her in the kitchen. She lamented to Jesus, *"Lord doesn't it matter to you that my sister has left me with all the serving? Tell her to give me a hand."*

But in Luke's scripture Jesus answered Martha with:

*"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about a lot of things. But only one thing is necessary. Mary has made the better choice and it is something she will never lose."*

The phrase *"Martha, Martha,"* is considered a phrase of endearment. Jesus most likely felt quite close to Martha.

Traditionally this passage has been interpreted as Martha's being overly worried and overworked.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 10: 1.

And being so, she misses seeing the value of Mary's listening to her teacher, and of seeing the importance of such a path of devotion.

Martha's spiritual path is described by Luke as *diakonia*,  
- a path of works.

But in doing her ministry, she runs into doubting her own spiritual path.

"Lord, don't you care?"

Like Martha many of us have places of doubt on our spiritual journeys. But importantly, instead of running away with her doubts, or retreating into isolation and anger, Martha comes to her spiritual teacher with an open heart and asks: "*Don't you care?*"

Jesus responded with gentleness and caring.

A good Rabbi, he instructed her in what he (Luke) felt was most important: to connect with the wisdom teachings he was giving that day in her home.

One possible learning is that those of us who are so very busy with the details of our lives may miss the very spiritual path we are walking upon.

A path that is so near to us, but we miss seeing or perceiving it, because our minds are elsewhere.

We become distracted and never do find the time for some form of spiritual practice – such as: prayer, meditation, yoga, tai chi, service to others and so forth.

So many people tell me they only have time for the business of their day, and have no time left over for exploring more of whom they are, what they believe, and how they want to act because of their beliefs.

"*Lord, don't you care?*"

Of course, Jesus cared.

He responded to Martha with compassion, and a longing for her, too, to benefit from his ministry on earth.

While Luke's Mary is given Jesus's approval for following a contemplative path, others may not be ready for such a contemplative journey.

I well remember at a teaching of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. There were thousands of people present.

During this fourteen-day teaching called the Kalachakra,  
in Bloomington, Indiana,  
His Holiness offered to answer a few questions every day.  
One afternoon a question came from an irate wife.  
Her question has remained etched in my mind,  
as is His Holiness's answer to her.  
She stated: "My husband wants to go off to the forest  
and meditate and leave me and our children.  
What kind of spiritual path is this?  
Do you really think this is okay? What kind of religion is this?"

Just remember Martha's question – "*Lord, do you care?*"

His Holiness, like Luke's Jesus gently and compassionately responded  
that it was not okay for her husband to leave  
and follow his spiritual yearnings  
at this particular time in his life  
as he had to complete what he had begun  
before he could venture into new spiritual experiences.  
He had certain karma that he needed to pay attention to-  
to his commitment to his wife and children.

Mary, on the other hand, was widowed and free to follow  
a spiritual path of devotion.

Martha's is a path of great service and giving through doing good works.  
She, of course, is free to be like Mary,  
and Jesus is telling her so.  
But Martha prefers to serve people, to love people.  
I believe her spiritual path is just as important as Mary's.  
A different pathway up the spiritual mountain.  
Neem Karoli Baba, Hindu teacher of Ram Dass  
and many other Western devotees,  
taught mainly of this path of service.

When asked by Ram Dass how to help others find their spiritual lives,  
Neem Karoli Baba famously taught one needs to "feed people, serve people."  
Just what Martha was doing so well for Jesus and his followers.

Eventually later in the Gospel of Luke  
during another visit from Jesus and his followers,  
we find that these two sisters switch their spiritual paths:  
the path of devotion and the path of service.

This time Mary is inside, serving the guests,  
and Martha is outside, attending solely to Jesus.

Mary and Martha are, for me, two aspects within all of us.  
- the holy, the sacred (through contemplation)  
enters into the ordinary (daily tasks)  
and thus, at the same time transcends the ordinary.

Getting out of one's self-absorption and moving into a space  
of helping others, of being the Marthas of our world,  
is so needed today to make our world a place where love  
and compassion and peace has a chance to be nurtured and grown.  
Without the Marthas, there could not be many Marys.  
Marthas helping to create spaces of sacredness,  
where like Mary with Jesus,  
we can tap into spiritual teachings  
that call each of us to be loving, kind, gentle and truthful.

In one sense what I am talking about here really is about our congregation,  
and the spiritual lives of each one of us.  
Our congregation survives partly because of the many Marthas in our midst,  
who do the numerous tasks of creating a safe place  
-creating our beloved religious community –  
by serving a variety of roles voluntarily to keep our congregation intact.  
For which each of us best be very grateful.  
And because of such service to all of us,  
we then can explore the Mary parts of whom we each are –  
explore what we believe to be true about the spiritual life,  
for ourselves, personally and communally.

We need both the Mary and Martha inside of us.  
The harmony of these two aspects of ourselves –  
The contemplative and the path of works  
will help us to engage in any activity mindfully  
such as teaching our children, or balancing the church budget,  
or preparing food in our kitchen for Coffee hour.  
Actions that will be tempered by knowing,  
as songwriter Peter Meyer so eloquently sang to us,  
last Sunday, that *everything is holy now*.  
*Everything, everything is holy now*.  
Such knowing can lead us to be loving, compassionate, kind,  
no matter what task or action we are undertaking.

Here's to our finding our Mary and Martha,  
Finding a balance between the two within us,  
and moving through life, knowing of the sacred  
always in our midst, as we face the tasks of each day.

Peace and love to you.