

“Sitting at the Lord’s Feet”

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 131;
Galatians 3:26-29; Luke 10:38-42



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“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’

“Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.’” (Luke 10:38-42)

Luke’s story of two sisters living together with their brother Lazarus in the village of Bethany had caught the imagination of readers for centuries and has made a significant impact on church teaching. Perhaps some of its appeal comes from the way Martha and Mary are traditionally portrayed. Anyone who has ever felt overworked while a sibling or co-worker sat around doing nothing can surely identify with Martha. There’s Mary with her head in the clouds, all moon-eyed and Martha stuck trying to get together food for all their guests and getting no help. The situation just isn’t fair.

On the other hand, plenty of others feel a certain kinship with Mary. Here she is trying to pay attention to Jesus and her bossy sister is fussing around in the kitchen and whining to Jesus to tell Mary to get up and get to work.

Historically, the church has taken this story a step further and drawn from it a lesson about the contemplative life versus the active life. Thus Mary is depicted as one who, shutting out the details of the world, lavishes her love and pure devotion upon the person of Jesus. The sixth century anonymous writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote several chapters about Mary and Martha, and stated, “...all these works, these words, and these gestures, that were shewed betwixt our Lord and these two sisters, be set an ensample of all activities and all contemplatives that have been since in Hold Church, and shall be to the day of doom. For by Mary is understood all contemplatives; for they should conform their living after hers. And by Martha, actives on the same manner; and for the same reason likeness.” Here then is the model for the still, silent nun rapt in adoration of the Lord and living a life of quiet contemplation. While this is held to be superior to the active life, acknowledgement is made that Martha’s way is still good, and she has been held up by the church as the model for all women not given to monastic, contemplative life.

Wayne Teasdale, in his book, *A Monk in the World*, writes that the contemplative dimension of life “is first known as a way of relating to all things: the cosmos, the natural world, society, others, God and oneself in the Divine.” He adds, “We regard and relate on a deeper level of attention. Paradoxically, we are alert while resting in the depth of attention. It is not a passive observing, bit a commitment to being aware

of the divine mystery enveloping everything.” He goes on to say that “It is love, our love of God, that animates the contemplative attitude, just as it is divine love that inspires, guides, nourishes and maintains contemplation. There are two sides to this: ours and the Divine’s. The contemplative attitude is already the active reality of the mystical life at work in us, and this presence is the Divine itself.” It is easy to see this in the story of Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Traditionally, Mary is representative of the way of interiority whereas Martha is externally oriented, caught up in earthly matters. Mary looks inward. A contemporary Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister, writes “Interiority, the making of interior space for the cultivation of the God-life, is of the essence of contemplation. Interiority is the entering into the self to be with God. My interior life is a walk through darkness with the God within who leads us beyond and out of ourselves to become a vessel of divine life let loose upon the world.”

Many of the prayer practices enjoying renewed interest today come from the contemplative tradition. Presbyterians are rediscovering an interior, contemplative spirituality through *Lectio Divina* and Centering Prayer, prayer practices based on quiet reflection on the Word of Scripture or silent, wordless offering of self to God.

But the real beauty of the Mary and Martha story is that it is also a story about balance. Mary and Martha are both important. Saint Benedict, who was born in 480, wrote a Rule for monastics based on Scripture that laid out the details for living a holy life. All these centuries later, it is still practiced, and not just by Roman Catholics. Protestants have been discovering that wisdom of Benedict’s Rule and are striving to live ordinary lives based on the principles laid out in the Rule. These include humility, hospitality, stability, and balance. “The framework of the day was constituted by the *opus Dei*, the saying of offices, the worship of God, which was at the centre of religious life. But since the intellect must be fed by learning and by study, there is room for *lectio divina*, that prayerful reading of Scripture and the Fathers, and since the work of the hands also has its place in there is manual labour in domestic tasks and in the running of the estate.” (*Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, by Esther

de Waal). Esther de Waal, author of *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, writes “The habit, which comes all too easily to many lay people, of dividing life into religious and the worldly, the spiritual and the bodily, and of feeling that the former, even if it claims even a small portion of our time is yet somehow superior and to be kept apart, would have probably appeared scandalous to the man who in speaking of the way to God uses simple physical terms.” Teresa of Avila summed up this idea of integrating the lessons of both Mary and Martha into our lives when she wrote “...there is a small lack of humility in to be Mary before having worked with Martha.”

So, let’s look again at Martha. In the society in which she lived, women were considered inferior to men. They lived a restricted life with few social relationships outside their family and did not converse with men other than male relatives. It is estimated that 95% of the women in Jesus’ world were illiterate. They could not hold office or positions of leadership and spent their days doing work that we would consider hard and tedious.

At the same time, it was possible for men to seek an education. Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, a Hebrew word meaning “teacher.” Rabbis were common. “They were not priests; unlike priests, they did not have to come from a particular tribe of Israel, and they did not become rabbis by heredity. A Jewish man became a rabbi by becoming a disciple of a rabbi. During his period of discipleship, he would learn from the more experienced rabbi the laws of the Torah, the oracles of the prophets, the traditions of the Jewish people, and the sayings of the rabbinic fathers. After his period of discipleship, if he had shown himself to be an extraordinarily good rabbi, he would gather a group of disciples of his own and begin to teach them” (*Jesus and the Pleasures*, by J. Christian Wilson). This is apparently the path Jesus took with one notable difference. Jesus did not restrict his teaching to men only.

In the fascinating book, *Jesus and the Pleasures*, J. Christian Wilson writes “Martha bears all the traditional traits of a first-century Jewish woman. She understands her place and sees her role within Jewish society as keeper of the house. She wants to show all appropriate, gracious Middle

Eastern hospitality to the important guest she is entertaining. Jesus’ visit to her home appears not to have been planned beforehand. She has not had time to prepare her home, as she would have like to for this special guest. She is counting on her sister, Mary, to help her quickly get things in order.”

This part of the story is exactly what Luke’s readers would have expected, but then the story takes a radical turn and Mary is shown to be surprisingly untraditional. Wilson writes “When Luke says that she ‘sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying,’ he casts her in a totally different role from that of her sister. Luke’s early readers, particularly his Jewish readers, would immediately understand this sentence in a way that would not be readily apparent to modern readers. Sitting at the feet of a master and listening to his words was exactly what a rabbi-in-training would do as a disciple to a master rabbi. In contrast to Martha, the traditional Jewish housekeeper, Mary plays the utterly untraditional role of rabbi and disciple of Jesus.” In this context, Martha’s rebuke is more than an accusation of laziness; it is an expression of indignation that Mary is pretending to be a rabbi and disciple of Jesus and rejecting her role and a traditional Jewish woman. Jesus’ response is shocking: “She has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.” Wilson writes “Like a part in a play, we could say that Mary has chosen the better role. It is a better role for a woman to be a rabbi than a housekeeper. This is not to say that being a housekeeper is not a good and acceptable role for any woman (or Man) who wants that role. But the better role is for women to become educated, to learn from masterful teachers, and to train for careers in society, including the career of ministry.” In the Kingdom Jesus promoted, men and women were considered equally worthy of the call to discipleship.

In our Presbyterian tradition, we are all called into co-ministry—ministry that has need of both Marys and Marthas. Perhaps it would be better to say that we each have a call to be both Mary and Martha in the world and in our church. In our *Book of Order* we read “All ministry in the Church is a gift from Jesus Christ. Members and officers alike serve mutually under the mandate of Christ who is the chief min-

ister of all. His ministry is the basis of all ministries; the standard for all offices is the pattern of the one who came ‘not to be served but to serve’” (G-6.0101). Our *Book of Order* goes on to say that “While ministry is one, specific forms of ministry may emphasize special tasks and skills... There may be forms of ministry in which primary emphasis is given to proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments, forms that stress deeds of love and mercy, forms that are primarily educational, administrative, legislative, or judicial, and forms that are primarily prophetic... As persons discover the forms of ministry to which they are called, as they are called to new forms, they and the church shall pray for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit upon them and upon the mission of the Church” (G-6.0104 and G-6.0105).

After years of careful consideration, I am preparing, like Mary, to actively seek a deeper understanding of Scripture and the teachings of Jesus and to prepare for the office of Minister or Word and Sacrament. I have taken the first step in that direction by applying to Presbytery to come under care as an Inquirer and have been approved. Now I am applying to Marylhurst University to begin working on my Masters of Divinity. In future I will also be attending San Francisco Theological Seminary in order to complete the degree and fulfill the requirements of the Presbytery to be a Candidate for the ministry. At this time I am hoping to use my experiences and gifts as either a part-time hospital or retirement community chaplain, but I intend to remain open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

In this journey I will need both the lessons of Mary and of Martha in order to maintain a balanced life. Not everyone is called to the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament, but we all can “sit at the feet of the Lord” and open ourselves to Christ’s teachings and the Word of God found in Scripture. We all can practice daily prayer and participate regularly in worship. And like Martha, we all can humbly serve one another as an expression of our love for Christ. Thanks be to God!