

**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas**  
**20 July 2025**

**Luke 10:38-42**

There are times when Jesus of Nazareth seems to be talking from both sides of his mouth. At least that is how it seems from a first glance. Let me give you an example. A couple of weeks ago, we read how Jesus sent his disciples two by two to prepare for his arrival at the Galilean villages. As part of his instructions, he tells his friends to eat whatever people place in front of them and to stay in the same house, without going from place to place. Today, he seems to chastise Martha for fussing in the kitchen as she is cooking for him and his friends. One of the criteria in Matthew 25:31-40 for recognition when the Master of the house returns at the end of days is that "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat." Well, Martha is doing just that; trying to feed him and the large group with him, yet he says to her, "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." When I read this parable, I often place myself in Martha's shoes and I imagine her saying, "Fine, cook your own meal. I am taking a nap!"

Let us set the context because I believe Luke intended for us to read the lawyer's story from last week together with the story of Mary and Martha, and I believe it is there that we find the lesson for this week. Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem where he will be killed. This journey began after the Mount of Transfiguration events. He is going from town to town preaching the Gospel and making disciples. Today, they "entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home." Luke does not give us the name of this village at this point, but John tells us the name is Bethany. Luke also does not mention the fact that the sisters have a brother by the name of Lazarus. So, for now, we will deal only with the information given.

Martha offers the Lord and his friends the gift of Hospitality, welcoming them and cooking for them. She has a sister named Mary, who did something scandalous, unseen in those days. She sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. This is very unusual because the word "Disciple" means one who learns at the feet of another, and women in those days are not entitled to a formal education, they do not learn at the feet of rabbis, and they do not sit among men as students. Their roles are highly prescribed by law and tradition. Yet, Jesus runs to her defense when Martha levies a complaint against her, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Jesus says that “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” In fact, the narrative passes judgement against Martha by saying that she was distracted by her many tasks.

I have a few questions at this point: 1. Why does Martha come to Jesus for help instead of speaking to her own sister? Kind of, “Mary could you come in here for a second?” 2. Why does Jesus choose to become involved in this private affair between two sisters? In modern terms we would say that he allows himself to be triangulated. 3. Why don’t we hear Mary’s voice in this story? She remains silent throughout the episode. 4. Is Jesus somehow saying that hospitality does not matter? Remember how highly praised hospitality is in the Jewish Scriptures, and also how highly Jesus has spoken about it. 5. What does Jesus mean when he says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing”? What we have here is much deeper than a domestic squabble and for this deeper meaning we must compare this passage with the lawyer passage.

The first similarity between the two stories is that we find unusual actions in both of them, behaviors that would have been completely unexpected by the listeners: A Samaritan offers compassion to a Judean and a woman who sits to learn and places herself in the role of a disciple. The second similarity is between what Jesus tells the lawyer to do and what Martha herself is doing. Jesus tells the lawyer to continue to do the works of loving God and loving his neighbor. Martha is doing exactly this. She is showing love in action by cooking for them. So, looking at these stories together, the contrast is not between doing the works of the law (Love God and Love Others) and listening as Mary has chosen to do, but between being anxious and not.

Remember the interaction with the lawyer. He wants to know what to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks, what is written in the law and how do you interpret it? Summarizing the answer, the lawyer says, “Love God and Love your Neighbor.” Jesus says, “You are right, do this!” But the lawyer wants to know more, so Jesus tells him a parable of the Good Samaritan to answer the question of “who is my neighbor?” In the Mary and Martha story he gives us the rest of his teaching, by showing us how to love God. “The story of the good Samaritan then develops the meaning of the command to love one's neighbor, and the story of Mary and Martha highlights the overriding importance of devotion to the Lord's Word as an expression of one's love for God.” ([Source](#)).

But, I still have a question about why Martha came to Jesus and not to Mary with her complaint. Could it be that the criticism is not so much about Mary as it is about Jesus? According to commentators, the expression “came to him” and asked,

means “stood by him, or even stood over him, or opposed him.” The passage indicates that Martha may be opposing what Jesus and Mary are doing. Rather than, “Don’t you care she is not helping?” Martha may be saying, “Don’t you know it is not proper for a woman to be seating at your feet? Why do you let her be so presumptuous as to think she is a disciple? She is acting like a man and this is outright embarrassing. Mary should be doing something else. She should be doing proper “womanly” duties. This interaction may have very little to do with helping Martha in the kitchen, and more to do with where Martha and the culture of the day believe the place of women to be. She is anxious about the hearsay of the community. This is an honor-and-shame-based culture and what a guest does honors or dishonors the household. Martha is concerned Jesus is dishonoring the household by allowing Mary to behave in such outrageous ways.

In a way, the answer to the question, “Howe do we love God above all things” is to listen to his word attentively, to prioritize our relationship with him, to spend time in prayer and listening to the Word. Jesus is not criticizing Martha for her work, but rather for her anxiety about perfect hosting, the opinions of the community, concerns for her sister’s reputation, etc. There are many forces pulling at Martha. She has a lot to worry about.

We too have many competing forces pulling us in different directions. We have work, children, aging parents, health concerns, financial worries, etc. It is easy to be so torn that we begin to prioritize the wrong things. Today’s passage reminds us that there is a time to do what we need to do and there is a time to sit and listen and reflect. The problem is that we live in a world that prices activity and action. We must always be doing something. We are made to feel guilty for siting to watch a television program, or to read a good book. We are often criticized for being too “Churchy.” We often feel guilty for taking vacations, taking our Sabbath’s rest, or even for taking a Sabbatical. This passage is not about Mary being lazy. If you remember the episode of Lazarus death in John 11:20, “When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.” This is a reversal. Mary stayed home to care for the guests, while Martha engages in a theological conversation with Jesus.

This passage is about loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind by spending time listening to his Word, by resting in Christ’s presence, by enjoying our Sabbath’s rest in the Lord, by refusing to bow down to the tyranny of the moment that demands constant busyness. Today, I invite you to rest, smell the roses, get lost in a good book, enjoy a pint, and spend some time in prayer and communion with God. There is a time to do and there is a time to sit and listen. Amen!