

What Really Matters

Luke 10:38-43

The scripture reading for this morning is very interesting for several reasons. First, this is a biblical episode that is unique to the gospel of Luke. No other evangelist tells the story of the interaction among Martha, Mary and Jesus.

Also, the story is very interesting because it gives us proof that Jesus had disciples who were women. Mary sitting at the Lord's feet gives us that proof. Only disciples sat at the feet of their Master.

Back in the first century, women were not supposed to be disciples, but God in the person of Jesus broke with human concepts that degraded women, children, the sick and the poor. Jesus gave those who were marginalized the value that every human being deserves. That's part of the Good News Jesus came to proclaim, "you are more than who some people regard you to be."

As we ponder on the words of Luke, I want you to know that this is not a story of *good vs. bad*. I know people give Martha a bad rap because in the story she is the one who is somehow criticized. I have heard people say that Martha is a representation of worldly-minded, jealous people. However, I believe this is a distorted depiction of who Martha is.

I don't think Luke is trying to tell us with a loud voice, "*DON'T imitate Martha.*" The reason I believe so is because I see several things in Martha that are praiseworthy and we should emulate. I see several qualities in Martha that we should model.

- I want you to notice the text begins by saying that Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. In the story, we see Martha as someone who is totally given to hospitality. I think (I hope you agree with me) that this is something we should all imitate, being a *hospitable* people.
- Martha is a determined servant of Jesus. All she wanted was to please Jesus, to give and serve the best to Jesus. I do believe that pleasing, giving the best, and serving Jesus is something we all are called to do.
- Martha was also a firm believer of Jesus. When her brother Lazarus died, Martha ran to meet Jesus, and in that moment of crisis she declared, "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world*" (**John 11:27 NRSV**). What a statement of faith!

Comparing and contrasting Mary and Martha is not the point of this story. It would be an injustice for me to send you home asking you to "*be a Mary, not a Martha.*" Both Mary and Martha were excellent disciples of Jesus with qualities that we should all imitate.

So, what is the point of the story then?

I think Luke was very intentional when he penned these words. If you have your Bible with you, you will notice that the story of Martha and Mary follows the story of The Good Samaritan.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the well-known parable of The Good Samaritan. As most of you know, this parable emphasizes that true love for God is shown with actions of compassion towards our neighbors. One of the point Jesus is making through this parable is that *acting* in accordance with God's law is more important than having knowledge of the law.

Now, Luke follows the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is about *doing/acting*, with the story of Mary and Martha. The story we are looking at today is about *sitting* at the feet of Jesus rather than doing. This is very interesting because in the parable Jesus tells the legal expert that *acting* in accordance with God's law is more important than having knowledge of the law. And at first sight, people may think that in the story of Mary and Martha Jesus corrects Martha for *doing* the same thing the Samaritan was praised for doing: welcoming, serving, showing love to others.

Here is the point I believe Luke is trying to make. Luke is writing to the first Christians and he is saying to them, "love your neighbor as yourself, act according to God's law, do the work of God, show compassion, be hospitable. That's the right thing to do. This is all good stuff. Yet, let me show you what good works, when in excess, can do to you. Let me tell you the story of Martha who was a firm believer and servant of the Lord, but her priorities were not in very good order."

The problem Luke is presenting us with the story of Mary and Martha points to the reality that we, with really good motives and intentions, are at risk of getting caught up in the busyness of ministry and life in general. Such excess of activity can lead us to neglect our relationship with God which in turn will affect our relationship with others.

The problem with Martha was that at this specific moment in her life, the "*doing*" had become a *distraction*. Martha was driven by the urgencies of living a life of service. And such a mindset led her to neglect her connection with the Strength that keeps us all going as we serve others.

Martha was being pulled from all directions. I imagine Martha going in and out of the kitchen trying to hear the important lessons Jesus was imparting. If that was the case, Martha was not fully present in the kitchen; neither was she fully present in the company of Jesus.

Martha's involvement in the many tasks prevented her from fully living in the moment and actually accomplishing things with excellence. Martha was doing so many things that her service perhaps suffered from her hyper-activeness.

In the summer of 2013, I had an experience that I think can be compared to Martha's. I received the visit of who was at that moment the pastor of my home church. We were meeting for the very first time, and I wanted to be a great host.

I remembered he arrived at the parsonage around 11:30 a.m. I had made all the arrangements to make a nice welcoming lunch. My wife had done her part extremely well, and everything was almost ready. I say almost because there was one thing missing, and I was in charge of that.

Rev. Omar arrived at our home. We gave him a little tour and offered him something to drink while my wife prepared the table and I grilled the steaks. A conversation developed and I didn't want to miss it. So, I was in and out of the house trying to listen to the conversation and grill the steaks at the same time.

At some point, I engaged in the conversation with such passion that I completely forgot about my given mission. When I finally remembered what I was supposed to be doing and went out, I found that the steaks were as black as the charcoal. My nice welcoming lunch was ruined. I was trying to do so many things at once, that the things I was doing were poorly done.

The “doing” for Martha became a distraction. That’s exactly what the text is warning us about. The tasks of ministry, in combination with our many other responsibilities, can become distractions that endanger our relationship with God. I want you to see how Martha is being affected by not having a right balance of “*doing and being*” in the presence of God.

Some people say that Martha was jealous of Mary, but I believe that to be a misconception. I do believe that Martha was burned out and she was just showing signs of it. Martha is judging Mary not maliciously, but incorrectly. She is cranky, feels alone, forsaken, unsupported, and the reason she is feeling this way is because she is perhaps overloaded.

Martha did not have a well-established and healthy rhythm of *doing and being* in the presence of God. In this cycle of *doing and being* in God’s presence, we have to give priority to “being.” Luke is talking exactly about this: **our priorities in the discipleship life**. Doing is more important than mere knowledge, and having our being in God is more important than doing, “*For in him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:28).

Now, giving priority to “being” does not mean doing nothing. Martha complained to Jesus saying, “*Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?*” (v.40). Mary was working with Martha. She just knew she needed instructions from her Master. Again, having a right balance of “*doing and being*” in the presence of God is key for successful discipleship.

Giving priority to “being” means receiving instructions at the feet of Jesus in order to be prepared to do the work of Jesus. These two go hand in hand. I love the fact that Mary and Martha are sisters, not enemies. This reminds me that *doing and being* don't go against each other. They actually go together. They are part of a legitimate continuum that includes them both.

A good friend and colleague, **Allan R. Bevere**, put it this way: “*Service without instruction makes no sense; instruction without service is irrelevant. There is a time for us to sit at the feet of Jesus, and a time for us to roll up our sleeves and get to work. There is a time to be Mary and a time to be Martha.*”¹ Doing and being complement each other. When we sit at the feet of Jesus, we receive the inspiration, nourishment, strength, and boldness that is needed to do the work of Jesus. Doing the work of Jesus, with Jesus, and for Jesus, will always lead us back to the feet of the Master.

Bishop Reuben P. Job wrote an easy-to-read book entitled *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*. In the book, Bishop Job summarizes the essence of Christians living in three simple rules.

1. Do No Harm
2. Do Good
3. Stay in Love with God

In the book, Job says that obeying these *simple* rules in one’s life is an act of faith and obedience that can only be accomplished through Christ who strengthens us.² The author states that even though joining God in what he is doing in the world is the right thing to do, it can trigger adverse effects in the lives of individuals that don’t take proper measures. We can break down while carrying out God’s mission. Human beings have limitations and without proper spiritual nourishment, people usually experience a state of acute fatigue that drains us and makes us ineffective.

This is why I believed Jesus, with unmatched kindness and affection, tells Martha: *Martha, Martha... you are worried and distracted by many things [those distractions will consume you]; there is need of only one thing. Luke 10:41-42 NRSV*

What exactly is that one thing that is needed?

Jesus is referring to what Bishop Job describes as “stay in love with God.” Luke defines it as sitting at the Lord’s feet and listening. No matter what you call it, having a close relationship with God, having our being in God, is the true source that empowers us to do everything else Jesus’ disciples are called to do.

We need to understand that having a close and healthy relationship with Jesus is what really matters. We need to understand that showing God’s love to people who are seeking and needing spiritual guidance and relief is a matter of becoming more spiritual, of sitting at the feet of Jesus, of staying in love with God. We need to engage in prayer and other spiritual practices not as

¹ Allan Bevere, “Allan R. Bevere: Mary Vs. Martha Or Chicken Kiev Vs. Chili: A Lectionary Reflection on Luke 10:38-42,” accessed July 13, 2016, <http://www.allanbevere.com/2016/07/mary-vs-martha-or-chicken-kiev-vs-chili.html>.

² Philippians 4:13

ritualistic exercises, but as pathways that God uses to transform and revive his people and fan into flames our love for him.

Earlier, we read the story of Abraham welcoming and serving three strangers. It was in the serving and being in the presence of those strangers that Abraham received a word confirming the birth of Isaac, the son of the promise. Church, it is when we take the time to be present in God's presence that we receive a word from God that propels us to God's designed future.

As I said at the beginning, I am not going to send you to the mission field asking you, "*be a Mary, not a Martha.*" I encourage you to go home *being a Mary and a Martha.* I want to encourage you to be a disciple that sits at the Lord's feet, listens to and is overtaken by God's word, and is filled with God's presence and power to witness to the end of the earth by doing the work of Jesus. Go acknowledging the many things you have to do. Go, knowing that those things can be a distraction. With that in mind, make a priority to sit at the feet of Jesus daily.

Martin Luther once said, "*I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.*" If you cannot sit at the feet of Jesus for three hours, do it for five minutes. Pray that God will help you stay in his presence as long as the Lord needs you there. Let's create the habit of spending time with God. Let's sit at the feet of Jesus to receive inspiration, nourishment, strength, and boldness to do the work of Jesus. Let doing the work of Jesus, with Jesus, and for Jesus, always bring us back to the feet of the Master.

SENDING FORTH

We leave the house of God,
but not the presence of God.

Let us root ourselves deeply in God's holy presence
and live out God's love for all.