

At Grace Episcopal Church in Manchester, NH, my sending parish—the place where I was formed and discerned for the priesthood—there is a beautiful stained-glass window right above the altar that depicts this short story we hear today. Jesus is seated, Mary is listening at his feet, and Martha is in the background, standing with a basket of bread. It's lovely. And depending on where you're sitting in the pews, you might glance up and think, "how idyllic". Or perhaps you say to yourself, "Poor Martha."

I mean, think about it. Jesus and his disciples show up, hungry and road-weary. Martha springs into action—because that's what hospitality looks like in her world. It's not just a nicety; it's a sacred obligation. And the text tells us that this is HER HOME. To fail to provide that hospitality would bring shame on her household.

Meanwhile, there's Mary....she's sitting. Nowhere near the kitchen...Not stirring the stew or setting the table. Just hanging out, soaking in Jesus' words.

Finally, Martha snaps. Honestly, I'm surprised it took her that long. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Now, here's the pivotal moment. Jesus replies: "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."

And cue two thousand years of Martha-shaming.

Well, I have something to confess. My name is Sandi, and I'm a Martha! Wholeheartedly and unapologetically.

Not because I don't value quiet contemplation—I do! But because someone (and you know who you are) has to make the coffee, unlock the doors, fill the candles with oil, hope the copier has enough toner, and track down the missing whatever.

Frankly, in many churches, and workplaces, and families, the Marys get the praise, and the Marthas get the to-do list.

So, yeah! I have a bone to pick with Jesus! What I do have is a lifetime of resentment with the way that this scripture has been interpreted and preached for the last two millennia or so. Just a few examples:

- Being busy is bad; sitting and listening is good
- DO-ing is not as spiritual as BE-ing
- Martha is just a crabby, anxious worrier, and Mary is the picture of the adoring student

- There are books written about M & M - “Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World”, where Mary’s chapter is called “Mary’s Extravagant Love” and Martha’s is “Martha’s Teachable Heart.”
- I even visited a website that expounded on “Martha’s trouble” of being perpetually distracted and even constitutionally incapable of being prayerful and willing to sit at Jesus’ feet.

I have always found it interesting that we say things like, “If you want something done, give it to a busy person.” And then we follow that up with, “Oh, you are always so busy, you need to take time to rest and refresh.” Another favorite of mine is when people joke and say, “You’re such a Martha; sit down for a minute.” I love what political satirist P. J. O’Rourke wrote: *“Everybody wants to save the Earth; nobody wants to help Mom do the dishes.”*

Martha’s been cast as anxious, controlling, bossy—even spiritually deficient. Meanwhile, Mary’s portrayed as the model disciple: still, silent, and glowing with divine wisdom.

But perhaps that’s not what Jesus meant at all.

I don’t believe for a minute that Jesus meant for Martha to be characterized for centuries as a crabby, resentful shrew. If we look at it, Jesus does not criticize Martha for serving. He doesn’t tell her to stop cooking or call her work unimportant. He doesn’t say she’s deficient for who she is or how she feels.

Truly, the issue he is getting at is Martha’s frustration and the way she expresses it, and what it signifies to him. I mean, we don’t know that Martha didn’t spend time in devotion and prayer earlier in the day before a bunch of travelers arrived at her door. In fact, Jesus’ words to her are loving and caring. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” What he does do is notice, notice something deeper: he notices her distraction. Her worry. Her fragmentation. So, it’s not busy Martha, but distracted Martha that is Jesus’ concern.

In fact, the Greek word translated as “distracted” in this passage is *periespato*. It comes from a root that means to be pulled or dragged around. This isn’t just being a little overbooked. This is being emotionally and spiritually yanked in all directions. Like the moment when your phone is ringing, the oven timer is beeping, and your grandchild’s asking for help with some crazy math problem.

Jesus sees Martha—really sees her—and says, “Martha, you are being pulled apart.”

And really—how could Martha not be distracted? Someone has to make sure people get fed. The work of hospitality—like the work of parenting, caregiving, leading, serving, and just keeping life moving—it matters. Things don’t magically appear on the table. Somebody chops the veggies,

somebody folds the laundry, and somebody answers the late-night calls. Martha's distraction isn't because she's doing something wrong; it's because she's doing so much that matters.

And that's what makes Jesus' response so tender. He's not telling her to stop caring or stop doing. He's saying, "You don't have to let the work steal your peace." There's a way to show up fully, without falling apart. There's space for both care and calm. And that, too, is part of what God wants for us."

Not: "Mary's better than you."

But: "Martha, your belovedness isn't based on how much you can keep up in the air at once."

Now, some people use this passage to create a personality quiz: Are you a Mary or a Martha? Are you more contemplative or more action-oriented? Do you light a candle and meditate, or are you the one alphabetizing the cans in our Little Free Food pantry?

And, of course, that's too simplistic. The truth is, we all have Martha moments. The part of us that gets things done, organizes the calendar, checks on the boiling pot, and makes sure the bathroom is clean before guests arrive.

And we all have Mary moments—the part of us that longs to just be, to listen, to sit, to let the world fall away for just a little while.

Both parts are good. Both are faithful. We can't have one without the other and be healthy in body, mind, and spirit.

So yes—Martha's work is essential. But so is Mary's stillness. You can't offer bread if your soul is running toward empty.

Now, if I'm honest, what's truly bugged me for years about this story isn't just how Martha gets treated—it's how the whole thing gets framed as a contest. As if one sister got it "right" and the other missed the memo.

But that's not how love works. And it's definitely not how Jesus works.

Our culture is obsessed with binaries—right or wrong, left or right, us or them. But that's not the Gospel. The Gospel lives in the space between.

That's what I see in that stained glass window at Grace Church: the space between the sisters. The silence between the words. The breath between action and rest. And I see Martha looking down at Mary with care and love.

Maybe that's where God is—dwelling in that holy space between.

So what if we stopped asking who was better and started asking: What is needed right now?

Sometimes the answer is: help with the dishes.

Sometimes the answer is: sit and listen.

Sometimes the answer is: cry and hold on to each other.

Sometimes it's: just keep on breathing.

And maybe sometimes it's: let someone else carry the basket for a minute.

Because here's the real message of this story: we are beloved whether we're doing or being, speaking or listening, serving or sitting.

Jesus didn't come to divide us into Marys and Marthas. He came to make us whole.

And maybe the "better part" that Mary chose that day wasn't about roles at all. Maybe it was simply presence. Maybe it was letting herself be loved by the one who had already chosen her. And by embracing each other, and ourselves, not for what we produce, but for who we are in Christ.

So, the next time you feel pulled in all directions, take a breath. Look for the space between the doing and the being. Remember that God is there.

And whether you're a Martha with a to-do list or a Mary with a journal—or more likely, a mix of both—there is a seat at Jesus' table for you.

And if the coffee's not ready yet? The welcome's already warm.

Amen.