

“Seeking Balance”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
July 21, 2019

**Luke 10: 38-42**

Stephanie Frey writes: *A friend of mine recalls that her mother always sat sideways in her chair during meals. Whether the table was surrounded by family members or invited guests, she was poised for action. She'd jump up if she'd forgotten something in the kitchen, if someone wanted steak sauce rather than the ketchup that was on the table, or if it was time to pass the serving dishes around again. This mom seldom relaxed enough to enjoy the food and conversation.*

*There is biblical precedent for that instinct and posture in the account of Jesus' visit to the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha offers immediate hospitality, welcoming Jesus and then busying herself with meal preparation, while Mary sits down with Jesus. One can imagine how the clatter of dishes in the kitchen grows steadily louder until Martha's exasperation at working alone is audible to Mary, who is engrossed in what Jesus is saying. Who is to say that passive-aggressive behavior didn't exist in New Testament households? (“Living With Martha,” *The Christian Century*, July 13, 2004: 16).*

In all honesty, I must confess that I have engaged in this passive-aggressive behavior as a Martha of this world. She is the queen of the house, the ruler of her domain, and does an exquisite job of keeping on top of every little task which must be done. She has welcomed this famous rabbi, Jesus, into her house, and now is likely preparing one of her finest meals for him. She is busy, trying to get everything done, while her sister Mary is just sitting there, at the rabbi's feet, oblivious to the work which must be done for everything to be done right. How can Mary be so obtuse? Doesn't she see that Martha can't get it all done by herself? Why won't she help this poor homemaker with a few of the odd jobs so they both might provide good hospitality? And then, of all things, when Martha asks Jesus for a little support, he rebukes her and makes her feel insignificant for what she is trying to do. Why can't Martha be made to feel like her role in life is just as important?

Well, her role in life is just as important, and we will see that Jesus doesn't exclusively rebuke her for what she's doing. He only reminds her that there are many ways to offer hospitality to him in our hearts as Christians.

To begin, one commentator notes that our preconceptions about Martha can lead us down the wrong path of interpreting this particular passage from Luke: *Martha very naturally becomes upset that her sister, Mary, spends all her time with Jesus and does not help with the family*

chores. We miss the point if we caricature Martha as an obsessive type who gets angry because she wants to be sure that everyone works as hard as she does. For the narrator, there clearly are many chores to be done, and Martha seems more distracted by the work that has piled up, with guests in the house, than by some inner need to see to it that if she is working, then, by golly, Mary is going to work too. There are apparently no servants to help, as Martha is working by herself (*Texts for Preaching, Year C*, 436).

And you'll notice that instead of confronting her sister directly, Martha chooses to bring Jesus into her distress. In modern-day language, we would say that Martha triangulates Jesus – which many of us adults today are very skilled at doing. “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” Why does Martha do this? Perhaps there was a rift between she and her sister, and she knew talking to her was pointless. Or maybe Mary would never help Martha with the housework, and Martha needed a second opinion, or at least someone to sympathize with her. Whatever the reason, it brings Jesus into the scene directly, and the response Martha gets is not what she had hoped for. “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.”

As I studied for this passage this week, I appreciated these thoughts from Stanley Saunders: *Interpretation of this brief story is usually determined by the stereotypes we heap on these two women, which all too often force us to choose one over the other. As a consequence, interpretation has long traded in binary oppositions . . . Neither woman comes off well: Jesus chides Martha for her anxiety, even though she seems to embody the ideal of service that Jesus elsewhere clearly affirms (10:40,41). Mary, despite choosing “the better part” (10:42b), never speaks a word. She has broken free of a traditional female role but remains passive. If we come to this story looking for an unambiguous role model in one of these women, with the other serving as foil, we will be disappointed . . . In the end, it may compel us to abandon our penchant for either/or, exclusive alternatives. How often is our society today riven by binary thinking? Americans are taught to approach virtually every social conflict in either/or, black/white terms . . .*

*While the two sisters seem to represent opposite ends of the discipleship spectrum, between hearing and doing, we should not see in them the embodiment of mutually exclusive patterns of behavior . . . By themselves Martha and Mary are each incomplete disciples, but together they embody the listening and service that Jesus has hoped for when he sends his disciples before him in mission . . . Just as Martha and Mary need each other, so the church needs diverse, interdependent members.*

*Not everyone in the church has the same gifts or calling. Discipleship is nurtured in community, not within the individual alone.*

*The early church succeeded in large part because the gospel found adherents among women, like Martha and Mary, who not only worked together in households, but among households that were otherwise usually in competition with one another. The church was successful in mission in such households precisely because their women leaders were so good at both hearing and doing, as well as offering hospitality* (*Connections, Year C, Vol. 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2019: 175-177*).

One of the challenges of the Christian life is knowing when you are tilted too far to one side or the other - listening or doing. All of us have a tendency to lean one way or the other; that is simply our natural gift. And as I look around our church's life, that is beautifully visible to me.

Some of us are gifted at being doers: volunteering to teach, organizing an event, working on projects indoors or outdoors. The doers were out in force the week of Vacation Bible School, setting things up, making preparations for meals, leading crafts, playing with the children, and making sure everything behind-the-scenes went off without a hitch. It will also be evident at upcoming events, like Worship in the Park, the Community Picnic, mission and service projects, and anytime we hold a worship service here at John Knox.

On the other hand, some of us are gifted at being listeners: diligently praying everyday for specific people and concerns, studying and sharing thoughts on Scripture, sharing in others' concerns through conversation. And that, too, is wonderfully self-evident here at John Knox. Every month, four members of John Knox meet for an hour-and-a-half here at the church, to pray. They pray for those prayer concerns we have shared in worship or on the "Connecting with You" cards. Or I think of those who call people on the phone, or send a card in the mail, to let others know they are loved and we are lifting them up in prayer. No attention is drawn to these and other "hearers" - but they are just as valuable and integral to our congregation's life as the doers. Each of you fall more to one side or the other in these gifts because that is how God created you, and how God calls the church into existence.

But sometimes I wonder if we fall too much on the side of one or the other, and subsequently are not hospitable to those who maybe fall on the other side of the line. The Martha's of the world may look at the Mary's and say, "Boy, they certainly aren't picking up their share of the workload here and doing the work we need them to do." Or the Mary's of the world may look at the Martha's and say, "Why don't they slow down a bit and listen to what God is saying to us, rather than staying so focused on the activities they are trying to plan and carry out?" Whether we are doers or listeners, Mary's or Martha's, we will

undoubtedly exclude the other in our desire to seek Jesus' favor in our life, and in our church.

Jesus does not exclude Mary or Martha - in fact they are two of his closest and dearest friends and disciples throughout his life and ministry. In his apparent rebuke of Martha, he reminds us all that the most important part of following him is to understand that we are all given different gifts, different personalities, different experiences which are meant to contribute positively to his church. The moment we begin to resent or exclude others because they are not listeners or are not doers, then we are not showing the hospitality to Jesus which he so richly deserves.

Stephanie Frey concludes: God's commands are always backed with promise, and the story of Mary and Martha is no exception. Each story gives us energy and aptitudes for living lives rooted in Christ and reaching out in service - to the word and to the neighbor alike. Living this side of Easter, we know what Mary and Martha could not know: that hearing and doing are finally in the realm not of law, but of gospel (*ibid*).

May we all recognize that, as individuals and as the church, we are incomplete without seeking balance between hearing and doing God's Word.

Thanks be to God for all the Mary's and Martha's of the world - all of whom are welcomed into Christ's loving presence. Amen.