

## SISTER ACT

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 10:38-42

Last week, Rev. Stacy Rector, our guest preacher for that Sunday, was kind enough to stand here while I was away visiting family. She preached a sermon she called "Living as Neighbors." And in this sermon, she reflected on the reading from the gospel of Luke—the familiar parable that we call the Good Samaritan. This parable originates with the question of a lawyer, who, wanting to make sure that he understands the fine print, asks Jesus, *Who is my neighbor?* Jesus tells him this parable about a man who is beaten and robbed and left for dead and how a priest and a Levite pass him by but the one who stops and provides aid is a despised Samaritan. Jesus then cross-examines the lawyer and asks, *Which of those who went down the road by the man in the ditch was a neighbor?* The lawyer responds, *The one who showed him mercy.* And it was.

Today, I want to consider the great sister act of the New Testament—the story of Mary and Martha. This account follows directly on the heels of the parable of the Samaritan, and I believe that the gospel writer purposely places these stories side by side to show us how we, as Christians—as neighbors—are to find balance in our lives.

In our reading, Luke tells us that Jesus and his disciples are traveling and are headed towards Jerusalem. As was their custom, they sought out hospitality in the villages they passed through. And we read that they come to a *certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. Martha had a sister named Mary.*

Jesus and the disciples accept the invitation and go to the sister's home where the sisters take on different tasks. Mary chooses to sit at Jesus' feet *listening to what he is saying.*

When Luke describes Mary as sitting at Jesus' feet, he means that she was treating him as a student would defer to their teacher. She is here to bask in his words. The apostle Paul, for example, describes himself as having been *brought up at the feet of rabbi Gamaliel.* [Acts 22:3] To be at one's feet means that you are here to learn. So, Mary chooses to place herself at Jesus' feet listening to his words: absorbing, contemplating, reflecting on what he says. Isn't that what all of us would do if we had the opportunity to be with Jesus? Wouldn't we drop everything just to listen?

However, by choosing to be with Jesus, that meant that Mary was not in the kitchen helping her sister prepare the meal for their guests. Martha, the one in the kitchen, would probably also like to be out there listening to the rabbi but she also

knows that the meal is not going to fix itself and she would like a little help from her sister.

You can be sure that Martha banged pots, slammed cabinets, muttered loud but carefully muffled curses, and tried to create enough of a stir that maybe her sister would get the message and get in here and help her.

But Mary doesn't budge. So, Martha pretty quickly gives up on the subtle approach and makes her frontal attack. She goes straight to Jesus and demands, *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 Martha goes to Jesus and not straight to her sister is not explained. Maybe she's so mad at Mary she can't even speak to her. Maybe she thinks Jesus will side with her. I often wondered if she's just hoping Jesus will pull that 'feeding the 5000 trick' and fix the meal himself. That would solve everyone's problems.

But Jesus says to her, *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.*

Now, traditionally, in this sibling conflict, we view Mary as the winner. She gets Jesus' approval; Martha gets the slap on the wrist. It would appear then that sitting at Jesus' feet in a posture of learning is more valuable than to be engaged in anxious and sometimes unnecessary service.

But I would ask you to join me in challenging this traditional view. Let's quit beating up on Martha and look at this story not as a win/lose situation, but as a call for resolution, a call for balance.

So, let's take moment and consider the three people in this story—Mary, Martha, and Jesus.

1. First of all, Mary.

Mary did indeed choose the better part. Visiting with Jesus sure beats stretching meatloaf for a bunch of drop-in visitors. Mary set her priority; she recognized the better portion; but one can't help thinking she could have lent her sister a hand.

2. Martha

Then, there's Martha. We must not forget that it was Martha, as the scripture so clearly points out, who was the one who welcomed Jesus into her home. Mary didn't invite Jesus; Martha did. Martha is the mover and shaker. As host, it's her role to offer food to the travelers. They weren't going to find food anywhere else.

Martha is anxious to fix a meal worthy for Jesus, but she feels so unprepared. She is so overwhelmed by her anxiety that she loses sight of her goal. We've all known people who get so caught up in the busy-ness of what they're doing that they forget the business of what they're doing.

Our English translation says that *Martha was distracted by her many tasks*. Literally, she was “distracted about much service.” That word service in Greek is *diakonian*—a word closely related to our word Deacon. Martha wasn't just busy in the kitchen; she was *deaconing*, she was serving in the name of Jesus.

It doesn't help that Martha reacts by playing the game called Poor Me. You know, where the player goes around saying how rough their life is. To play, all the other players, when confronted, are supposed to respond with Poor You. Jesus doesn't play Martha's game. That brings us to the third point:

### 3. Jesus' Response

As I said a moment ago, traditionally, we interpret Jesus' response as being harsh on Martha. From the story, it would appear that Mary gets the pat on the back and Martha the slap on the wrist.

Let's challenge that tradition. The story doesn't say that Jesus rebuked her; he never says that Martha was wrong. Quite the contrary. He's very gentle with her.

- 1) Jesus shows understanding (*Martha, you are worried*);
- 2) and puts her situation in focus (*you are distracted by many things*);
- 3) and he offers her guidance (*there is need of only one thing*).

Jesus doesn't say Mary is a better person. He says that *Mary has chosen the better part*. He doesn't say she chose the best part, only a better one. So, what is the best part?

The best part is being able to strike a balance between Being (like Mary) and Doing (like Martha); by sitting with the Lord (like Mary) but also by preparing for his coming (like Martha).

Remember Jesus' question to the lawyer, *Which of these was a neighbor?* If we apply it to Mary and Martha, what's the answer? Which one is a better neighbor to Jesus? Is it Martha, who sees to his needs, or Mary who spends time with him. Martha chose the good part; Mary chose the better part; together they choose the BEST part; together they are balanced.

The Mary/Martha conflict is in each of us as we seek to lead lives as fulfilling as possible. We can't ever make the conflict disappear. Some of us might label

ourselves Martha and some Mary. But each has part of the other inside, in tension, pulling us this way and that.

What Mary did—sitting at Jesus’ feet—was good. Martha’s service in the kitchen was good. The conflict arose because Martha was anxious about what she was doing. For some reason, she lost sight of the purpose of serving. The story could easily be flipped and focus on Mary. Imagine Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet yelling at her sister, “Martha, Martha. You’ve got to get in here. He’s talking. You need to hear this, now. Martha, where are you? Lord, can’t you make my sister get out of the kitchen?” And Jesus might say, “It’s okay, Mary. Don’t be anxious. Your sister is doing good things.

It is not about what we do; it is about our attitude as we do it. At the risk of sounding very ’70s, we need to lose ourselves in the moment.

Consider the church. Which would be better—a congregation composed of all Marys or one comprised only of Marthas? Or how about half of each with the Marys glued to their pews in the sanctuary and the Marthas in the basement staging a bake sale, day care, literacy class, soup kitchen, clothes closet, and stress management seminar all at the same time.

Maybe the wisdom from Ecclesiastes can offer us guidance here: *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.* [Eccl 3:1]

In his sermon on this passage, Robert McAfee Brown, presbyterian minister and theologian, writes, “I think our tendency around here is to be more Martha-like than Mary-like. We are addicted to noise and activity. I want to emphasize the need to include Mary-times in our lives—as personal Bible study, meditation, silence, worship, corporate worship, etc.”

If we fail to strike the balance, writes Dr. Brown, then we run the risk of, on the one hand, pious irrelevance, and on the other, destructive burnout.

I will admit, that as a pastor, this is my challenge every week—to find the balance between the listening and the doing. It’s too easy for me to be more Martha than Mary as I juggle all the pesky little details at church that can consume a week. For example, this week, over two days, I’ve spent about an hour just trying to make that camera work so that on Sundays those of you who can’t be with us in person will have a better experience. My to do list can quickly become an avalanche of distractions.

The lesson I find in this story of these two sisters is that as Christians, we are stronger in community. Yes, we have our individual faults, but together, if we combine our strengths, then we are better able to fulfill our mission to be a welcoming community of disciples of Jesus Christ continually demonstrating God’s reign. And that is not the good part; that is not the better part; that is the best part.