

Sermon: Mary and Martha

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There's a saying that "there's one in every family;" you know what I mean, and you probably are already thinking of someone. In every family there is that one person who is a bit odd, or who can be counted on to embarrass everyone at the worst possible moment, or who creates drama (ideally with themselves as the star of the show) or who just likes to make things difficult for everyone. It's true, there really is one in every family, and if you're not sure who it is in your family, it might be you.

This morning's scripture passage is one of those readings that makes us think about our families, and how they can sometimes get under our skin. I have one sister, and we're very different. I always envy those sister relationships that are strong and close, where they're each other's best friend and confidante. My sister and I do not have that kind of relationship. We have different lifestyles, different outlooks on life and the world, different ways of thinking about things and different ways of doing things. She makes decisions and choices that I don't like, and I do things that make her roll her eyes. So, I found that this passage resonates for me, although not in a clearcut way. I can't read this and immediately say, "oh yes, one of us is Martha and one of us is Mary." In some ways I'm like Mary and she's like Martha. In some ways I'm like Martha and she's like Mary. But it's definitely one of those passages into which you can insert yourself when you read it: "where would I be in this scene?" So let's take a look at the scene. Jesus spent a lot of his time during his years of earthly ministry traveling from village to village around Galilee, teaching and healing and calling people to repent and turn back to God. In this passage from the gospel of Luke, he is not in Galilee - he has come to the village where Martha and Mary lived, the village of Bethany which is outside Jerusalem, and Martha and Mary know him, and invite him to stay with them in their home.

In many other Bible stories we read of people rejecting Jesus, not allowing Him to stay in their homes; we read of people driving him out of their villages; we read that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." So we know that Martha - likely the older of the two, and therefore the matriarch - is a particularly special person, brave and kind and sensitive, who opens her door to the one whom many rejected and invites him in.

She must have been a very kind person with a heart for hospitality, so it is no surprise that upon inviting Him into her home she set to the work of making His stay as comfortable as possible. On top of her regular household chores, she now has the task of attending to this very special guest.

One would think that this was the natural and right thing to do, attend to a special visitor in her home with great attention, right? So naturally Martha set to work in the way that one would in those days,

fussing, cooking, cleaning, and maybe even getting water, baking bread, or even slaughtering an animal for food. She wants to give her very best to this important person who is in her home, which is normal and correct, right? Any one of you would no doubt do the same thing.

So, when she sees that her sister, Mary, is not lifting a finger, is just sitting there, listening to the conversation, she becomes upset. As sisters, sharing a house together, it is both of their responsibility and obligation to share the workload, both on a day-to-day basis and when there are special circumstances. She sees her own way as the only correct way of doing things, and does not see it as an option, a choice that is hers to make.

On one hand, inviting Jesus into our lives, into our homes, like Martha did, is the important first step to having a relationship with Him. We cannot have a relationship with Jesus without first inviting Him in. And when He is invited, he will come in - and then we have to choose when and how to respond to his presence.

Many people are like Martha, and think that attending to Jesus is done through activity. It's true, one of the ways we express our commitment to following Christ is through service: volunteering to help with the mission and projects of the church, helping to care for other members, and for the space we have set aside for worship, visiting and praying with other members of the community, and making other active contributions.

Taking action is an important part of our Christian life. In the story of the Good Samaritan, for example, Jesus showed that being "religious" was not good enough when it comes to our relationship with God, that serving and attending to the needs of others is very important.

But there is a time to be active, and then there is a time to be quiet and listen, and it's important to know which response is needed and when. That is the point of this Bible story.

Our very first priority as Christians is to have a relationship with Jesus, to know Him, to listen to Him, to converse with Him. How do we do that now, when Jesus is not physically walking from village to village, and dropping into people's homes? We do it through prayer and Bible Study, through worship and quiet meditation. How do we listen to Jesus? By immersing ourselves in scripture, and hearing the Bible being taught. Active service, then, is our response to the relationship we have with Jesus, our response to spending time sitting at his feet.

When the Word of God is being read and taught, that's where our hearts should be. If we are busy with activities, distractions, other conversations going on in the world, and we don't take seriously our time

spent in the Word of God, then we don't really have a relationship with Jesus, and our activity - even if it is church-related activity - is not truly God-serving.

Jesus, in this passage from Luke, identifies clearly for us what our top priority in life should be. He says, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." He doesn't condemn Martha, he corrects her, but with a loving tone. Jesus' correction is always done with such great love. The thing is, once Martha's work is done, it is simply done, and she will have missed out on a special opportunity to spend time with Jesus. But for Mary, being with Jesus - listening to him and knowing him, while she had the opportunity - was her top priority, and once she was filled with His wisdom and love, she would carry that in her heart throughout her days as she went on with the work (that was still there waiting to be done) and it would direct all of her activities.

It is a tremendous gift that we have, to be able to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, our savior, our teacher and our friend. When we immerse ourselves in His word, He alone fills our lives with meaning, and without Him, none of the million activities we could engage in have meaning, even if they are well intentioned, even if they are done in or for the church. Whenever we have the opportunity to sit at his feet and hear His word for our lives, it is a gift to us, and if we stop to receive that gift when it's offered, all the other activities will still be there waiting for us and we'll be able to approach them with a new sense of purpose and energy.

The blessing we have been given is to be in communion with God Almighty, who created the Universe and guides its course. Our opportunity is now, if we wait to attend to other tasks first, it may be too late. Will we spend our time in busy activities, or will we take every opportunity we get to sit at the feet of Jesus, and get to know him better? "Mary has chosen the better way, and it will not be taken from her." May it be so for each of us. Amen.

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