

**Sermon 07-18-10**  
**Rev. Mark E. Sloss**

**Luke 10:38-42**

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

---

Have you ever noticed the tendency towards categorizing people towards one or the other of the two sisters in this story? Men might be a bit more immune to this than women, being a gender removed, but they too can be pigeonholed into the Mary/Martha dichotomy.

Which are you, the contemplative Mary, hanging on to Jesus' every word, or busy Martha, someone who likes to see things get done. At women's circle meetings the Marys lead the Bible Study and the Marthas provide the refreshments and clean up. I've know some women who hate this story because it creates this tendency towards categorization and on top of that on the surface it appears to idealize Marys and villainize Marthas.

A surface reading of this text might lead some people to devalue serving, or make it secondary to devotional or study practices. But, I don't think its Martha's serving that's the real point of contention in this story. As disciples of Jesus we all need a good balance of being contemplative and studious like Mary, and active in serving like Martha. I know of a retreat center in New Mexico that by its very name highlights the need for both things and not one over the other. It's called the Center for Action and Contemplation.

Throughout the gospels Jesus champions serving one's neighbor. In the passage just preceding this one that we heard last week in worship, he tells a questioning lawyer the story of the Good Samaritan who stopped to help the guy who robbers left beaten and half dead in the ditch, and then says, "Go and DO likewise."

No, its not Martha's serving that Jesus challenges here, but what was going on in her head while she was busy serving.

I wonder how long she had been stewing about it before she couldn't contain herself any longer and let loose on Jesus. Martha had every right to be upset with her sister Mary. The text tells us this is Martha's home, which leads me to presume that she is the older sister. She had every right then to expect her younger sister to bide by her wishes, and from what we know of Middle Eastern culture in Jesus' day, women were not taken in as disciples by rabbis. Martha had every right to presume that

Mary would fulfill the role expected of her and help her in the kitchen. Somehow she just couldn't see that her guest wasn't your ordinary rabbi.

It grated on her that Mary just sat at Jesus feet, like she was a disciple. I wonder how many times Martha went in and out of the room before she couldn't contain herself any longer. I can just hear her muttering under her breath, "Who does she think she is? It's not fair that I have to stoke the fire, keep an eye on what's cooking, and shuttle food and beverage into the guests, while she just sits there like she's one of the guests. It would be so much easier with another pair of hands and feet, and they are right there on my sister, who's acting like the man of the house, rather than the younger sister. If mom were still around, it would be different.

Martha's disgruntled stewing didn't stay focused solely on Mary, but began searching for other targets, and found one named Jesus. Can't he see it? Doesn't he care that I'm slaving away here all by myself? Doesn't he know that it's not Mary's place to be a disciple. Finally, she couldn't contain it any longer and it comes spewing out: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

What a classic example of triangulation. Martha doesn't address Mary with her disgruntlement, but triangles in a third party, in this case Jesus, to tell Mary to get with the program and do what is expected of her.

Before we examine Jesus response to her, let's stick with Martha for a moment. Who among us has not been down that same path, stewing over some slight or disagreement? Who among us hasn't appealed to parental authority in order to get a brother or sister to bend to our will? Before we come down too hard on Martha, let's admit it - Martha is us. We've all been there and done that.

Martha's state of mind reminds me of a story about two monks:  
A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a very young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman was very hesitant about the fast current and asked if they could help her.

The senior monk carried this woman on his shoulder, forded the river and let her down on the other bank. The junior monk was very upset, but said nothing.

They both kept walking and senior monk noticed that his junior was uncharacteristically silent and inquired "Is something the matter, you seem upset?"

The junior monk replied, "As monks, we are not permitted a woman, how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders? You're flirting with danger."

The senior monk replied, "I left the woman a long time ago at the bank of the river, however, you seem to be carrying her still."

Have you ever carried fret and worry over some situation or encounter? Has it ever stewed within you and seemed to gain a life of it's own?

Martha was carrying her sister Mary, back and forth as she attended to the needs of her guest, and it not only was it an obstacle in her relationship with Mary, it also became an obstacle in her relationship with Jesus. Listen to how she refuses to let Jesus be Jesus, and presumes to tell him what to do: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Martha's telling Jesus what to do, setting it up that if he doesn't follow her will, then it must mean that he doesn't really care about her.

But Jesus doesn't let her get away with it. Martha had lost a sense of proper boundaries and was trying to control the lives of those around her. This is what Jesus challenges her on. First, he calls her by name Martha, Martha, he calls her to remember who she is. Then he challenges her to look at herself, you are worried and distracted by many things.

Martha, Martha, you're not here. You're worried and distracted and not present to what's happening here in this given moment. Jesus doesn't appear to be in favor of multi-tasking. He also wants her to see that she's trying to take away her sister's freedom of choice. By telling her that Mary has chosen the better part that will not be taken from her he in effect is telling her, "You can't run Mary's life."

I think we get confused about this passage, when we presume to think that the better part is study and devotion over serving. I think the better part that Jesus refers to is presence. Mary was present and attentive to Jesus, while Martha was distracted by her disgruntlement.

There is also one other thing that Jesus' says to Martha here, "There is need of only one thing." What is that one thing? Is it mindfulness? Is it being awake and alive to what's going on within and around you? Is it the presence of Christ? Is that one thing different for different people? Does it change as one passes through different transitions in life? Jesus never says what that one thing is, so maybe it's a call to practice discernment. What is the one thing that you're called to focus on right here and right now?

This past week I helped lead Sr. High Servant Camp at Lutherwald, which was attended by 25 young people from throughout our synod. It's a week full of fun, serving and learning. One of the days we spent some time with this Mary and Martha story and I invited them to use it as a template for walking a labyrinth. A labyrinth is a tool for learning the practice of pilgrimage, usually walked silently in a spirit of prayer. Labyrinths are circular and there is one path in any labyrinth that twists and turns all the way into the center, and one takes the same path back out from the center. Here's how we used this story.

On the way in we were like Martha, worried and distracted by many things, and on the path in we sought to let go of those worries and distractions, to let them just fall away on the path. In the center we sought to be like Mary sitting at the Lord's feet, open and attentive to whatever the one thing is in our life, be it a new insight, or new calling, a new sense of God's presence or whatever message God has for us this day. On the path out we thought about how we might put this one thing into practice in our lives and in our world.

We can use this story as a template in our worship today as well. Our Confession and gathering liturgy have helped us to let go of our worries and distractions. We've been attentive to the Word, and will continue to be attentive to the one who is present as our guest and host at the table. There is need of only one thing. I invite you to open yourself to discerning what's that one thing for you this day. And then we will be sent to carry that one thing back into our everyday lives.

Today we hear the call to be Mary and Martha, the call to contemplation and the call to action. Jesus confronts our tendencies to get lost in our worries and distractions. He challenges all the ways that we harmfully inhibit the freedoms of those around us. Today he invites us to wake up, be present, and live out our one given life to the full. He's here right now to show us the way. He is the way. He is our better part.