

## Being Present

The story of Mary, Martha, and Jesus sparks a variety of memories for me. During my childhood, our family attended a small church about 25 miles from our home. On many Sundays, we would host or be hosted by one of two families with children about the same age as us. Sometimes all three families would be together. It wasn't unusual for there to be anywhere from 12 to 18 people around the table.

The routine would be the same no matter whose house we were in. The women and girls would rush to the kitchen to cook and mash the potatoes, carve the meat, make the gravy, slice the pie, and finish setting the table while the men sat in the living room and the boys released some energy through a wrestling match or some other activity.

When the meal was over, the same sort of division would occur. Women and girls in the kitchen cleaning up. Men in the living room talking. Boys outside playing some kind of sport. Looking back, I'm not sure why I didn't resent this division more than I did. I suppose it was because I enjoyed talking and singing with the women as we did what we were expected to do.

Later on, the division of labor during our family gatherings became more equitable. While it was still unusual to see women in the living room while work was happening in the kitchen, it wasn't unusual for men to be cooking and cleaning up along with them. However, a different kind of division would occur. Some people wanted to sit at the table and talk long after the meal was finished, while others were eager to clean up and move on to the next activity, or at least to more comfortable chairs.

I imagine not many of us do as much hosting as my parents and their friends did – the trend is to eat out together rather than prepare food for our guests – but when we do, we face a dilemma like that of Martha and Mary. When the people arrive, do we concentrate on all the last-minute meal details, or do we give our full attention to our honored guests? When two people share the hosting duties, it isn't as much of an either-or situation as it is when someone hosts alone. And, of course, it's not unusual for guests to insist on helping with the final meal preparations.

Does the story from Luke 10 provide insight into how to be a good host? Or is it about something else? <sup>1</sup> Luke seems to portray Mary as the “good” sister while Martha comes across as the “bad” one. Mary models ideal discipleship, while Martha allows housework and hospitality concerns to get in the way of listening to Jesus.

Is this portrayal fair? Showing hospitality to guests was vitally important in ancient societies. Martha was doing expected and necessary work. In fact, earlier Jesus taught his disciples that the one who welcomes him welcomes the one who sent him. <sup>2</sup> Martha does this through her “service.” In addition, by portraying Mary as silent and passive, isn't Luke simply

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 12 of “Meet Jesus, the Messiah” from Shine, [Shine - Menno Media](#); and Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, John Knox Press, 1990, pp. 149-152.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:48

reinforcing the traditional, subordinate role of women and criticizing active, capable, vocal women like Martha?

Luke is the only gospel writer who recounts this story, but John also mentions Martha and Mary. John knows them as sisters of Lazarus. In both stories he tells, the behavior of the two corresponds to Luke's description with Martha portrayed as the dominant sister. In one story, Martha goes out to meet Jesus, while Mary sits in the house.<sup>3</sup> In the other, Martha serves dinner while Mary anoints Jesus' feet.<sup>4</sup> Again, Martha is the "doer" while Mary is the "hearer."

When we read these stories, it's easy for us to overlook the radicality of both sisters' actions. Luke tells us that when Jesus entered the village, Martha "welcomed him into her home."<sup>5</sup> Jesus is received into a woman's home. There is no mention of a brother or any other man. This was highly unusual in those times. And then, Jesus taught a woman. Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying."<sup>6</sup> In those days, rabbis didn't allow women to "sit at their feet," that is, to be disciples. But Jesus – and Luke – appear to have no problem with this.

We're left to wonder again. Why does Jesus rebuke Martha and praise Mary? Showing hospitality to neighbors and strangers is an essential aspect of discipleship. Luke explains, however, that Martha was "preoccupied," "worried," and "distracted."<sup>7</sup> The repetitious description of her temperament emphasizes how important this is. The problem with Martha is not that she is serving but that she is overcome with worry and agitation about "many things."

Mary, on the other hand, sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his teaching. She hears the word. Elsewhere Luke emphasizes "hearing the word" of Jesus as an essential aspect of discipleship. For example, in Luke 8:21 he states, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."<sup>8</sup> Mary isn't avoiding responsibility. She is doing what disciples should do first and foremost: listen to Jesus.

Mary and Martha represent complementary instead of competing models of following Jesus. Both hearing and doing are essential in a life of discipleship. The passage we heard from James makes this point.<sup>9</sup> Jesus often pairs hearing and doing as well. In fact, the story Luke includes right before this one is the parable of the good Samaritan.<sup>10</sup> In that story, Jesus meets a man skilled in Scripture – in the Word – who has questions about how to live it out. Jesus offers him an example of a man tending to the physical needs of a stranger. In today's story, Jesus visits with a woman so busy serving she doesn't hear the word. Jesus offers her the example of her sister. To the man, Jesus says to go and do; to the woman, Jesus says to sit down, listen, and learn.

Both of these stories commend "hearing" and loving the Lord with all of one's heart, soul, and mind. The contrast between Mary and Martha is not between "hearing" and "doing" but between "hearing" and "agitated worry." If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon

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<sup>3</sup> John 11:20-28, 39

<sup>4</sup> John 12:1-3

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:38

<sup>6</sup> Luke 10:39

<sup>7</sup> Luke 10:40-41, *Common English Bible*

<sup>8</sup> Luke 8:21, New Revised Standard Version; see also Luke 6:47; 8:15; 11:27-28.

<sup>9</sup> James 1:19-25

<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:25:37

serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. Disciples must be careful that anxiety and the distractions of “many things” do not impede their listening to Jesus, which is, after all, the one thing most emphasized in this situation.

I used this story a few years ago as part of a series on stewardship of time, talents, health, money, creation, and relationships. A good balance within and among all of these areas leads to a life of wholeness in which we experience peace within ourselves, with God, with our neighbors, and with all of creation. It seems the point Jesus is making with Martha and Mary is that time is primarily a tool for forging relationships rather than simply accomplishing tasks. Martha is concerned with the urgent tasks of hospitality. Mary seizes the opportunity to spend time with Jesus. Mary takes the time to be present with Jesus while Martha is so distracted she may have forgotten that Jesus is even in the room.

This is one of the big questions of life. How do we separate those things that may feel urgent but may not be important from those things that are important but not necessarily urgent? Sometimes the urgent activities are the important ones. But often the “urgent” are those things that call for our immediate attention but may not have long-term significance.

The devices most of us carry with us offer a great example of this. How often has someone been distracted from a conversation by a noise from their phone signaling that a call, a text, or some other “important breaking news” is demanding their attention? It’s not unusual to spend time in a room where everyone’s attention is on the device in their hands rather than on the people around them. While our devices provide a good way to connect with someone they often serve as vehicles of isolation.

Even without these devices, we easily allow preoccupations, worries, and distractions to keep us from being fully present with each other and with God. Instead of truly hearing what someone is saying to us, we work on our responses or rebuttals or think about what we want to talk about next. Instead of asking what someone needs from us, we begin doing what we think is best for them. Instead of listening for the voice of God, we fill our ears and minds with noise. Instead of hearing and doing the word of God, we hear what our favorite politicians, news sources, and social media accounts want us to hear and use that information to plan our actions. (I could have used the word “I” in place of “we” in each of those four statements, but that would have been too convicting, so I included everyone else in my confessions.)

As we go about our daily activities, it’s crucial to take some time to think about our use of time – to differentiate the urgent from the important, the demanding from the significant. One way to do this is to consider our identity and commitments. We must spend time remembering who we are. We are – everyone is – God’s good creation, loved, and worthy. We need to create space to spend time with God. We need to choose activities to reinforce our God-given identity and the identity of other people.

In addition, we must spend time honoring our commitment to share God’s love through celebration, nurture, service, and peacemaking. We do this by reading scripture, following Jesus, listening for God’s voice, and letting the Spirit guide us. We witness to God’s peace by experiencing and offering reconciliation, rejecting violence, and resisting injustice. We nurture and experience transformation by reflecting God’s love and embodying the grace, joy, and peace of the gospel.

None of us can do all of these things all at once all of the time. But we can keep them in mind and allow them to influence our schedules and activities and how we interact with each

other. And, of course, we must remember that part of God's creation is a time of Sabbath, a time of rest and rejuvenation.

Jesus and the disciples entered a village, and Martha welcomed him into her home. Martha busied herself as hostess. Her sister, Mary, sat near Jesus and listened to what he was saying. Martha asked Jesus to tell Mary to help with the work. Instead, Jesus explained that Mary was focused on what was truly important. He invited Martha to a life less filled with distractions. The way Mary had chosen would not be taken from her.

What anxieties and distractions cause you to lose focus on what is important? How will you set aside time and space to listen for God this week? What choices will you make that will have lasting significance for you and for others? How will you set aside – at least temporarily – your preoccupations, worries, and distractions so you can be fully present with those around you?

May the God of Mary and of Martha, give all of us hands to serve, a heart to love, and a soul that waits and wonders at the way God constantly challenges us to be true to the divine way of life. May we seek to be present with God and with each other. Amen.