

"Being and Doing"  
Luke 10:38-42  
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Cottage Grove United Church of Christ  
Cottage Grove, Minnesota  
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Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The story of Martha and Mary has been one of my favorite scriptures since childhood. Maybe I particularly liked the picture that accompanied this story in my children's Bible, or maybe I liked the names "Martha" and "Mary." In recent years I have tried to figure out why this has remained my sentimental favorite. Then, a few years ago, it suddenly dawned on me: I love this story because I identify so closely with *both* Martha and Mary.

I am, as the title of a recent book suggests, "Martha to the Max." I am a *detail person*, I like things done "just so," and I can become distracted or worried so much about the details that I forget to see the larger picture. On the other hand, I have a lot of "Mary" in me too. I yearn for the contemplative life, long to "sit at the feet of Jesus." I spurn dusting over reading a good book; I will take a quiet walk over slaving over a hot stove any day.

...I think we *all* have a bit of both Martha and Mary in us. Perhaps we favor one course of action over another -- we all know the "Marthas" of this world (both male and female), who Jesus would undoubtedly catch busying themselves with the details, cleaning up the dishes rather than sitting with the guests. And we probably know a few "Marys" too (again, both male and female), the dreamers who may work hard but are always able to focus themselves in prayer, when their counterparts are still worrying about the tasks of the day.

The story of Martha and Mary suggests a need for *balance* -- qualities that each one of us *have* and must learn to balance in our daily lives. Here Jesus appears to favor the quality of "being" over "doing," and he speaks sharply in this regard. However, as usual, our scriptures are not all that they seem to be.

We must first deal with the fact that this particular scripture is about *women*. While both male and female can relate to the qualities of Martha and Mary, it is important to note their original gender, both because women were marginalized in first century Palestine, *and* because the women mentioned in our scriptures are not often named.

This is a particularly interesting scripture with regards to its treatment by biblical scholars. I have heard modern scholars hail Jesus for allowing Mary, and “inviting” Martha, to play a role not often allowed to women of his world: that of disciple. They argue that Jesus frees these women from their bonds to the kitchen, frees them from their expected role of hostess and servant to male guests. *Marvelous!*

But other scholars *cry foul*. They see this story as *sexist*. They point out that Jesus humiliates Martha in front of her sister, calling her twice by her first name: “Martha, Martha!” and telling her that Mary’s decision to sit at Jesus’ feet was “the better part,” obviously indicating that her own worry over providing for her guest was wrong, perhaps even irreverent.

Martha was doing what was expected of women of that time working hard at providing for her guest. Not so long ago in our own country, women were expected to busy themselves in the kitchen while the men relaxed and enjoyed that which their hostesses had prepared. For Jesus -- *the guest* -- to yell at Martha for doing what she naturally thought it was her duty to be doing would probably have *confused* Martha, and likely have hurt her feelings. She knew Jesus was a religious leader -- and she was a *woman* in first century Palestine -- so she would have kept her mouth shut. But if *I* were in her place, Jesus’ words would have cut me to the core.

...So, what does it mean for *Jesus to tell a woman* in first century Palestine -- or any of us women and men today -- that it is better to sit at his feet than to do the work that needs to be done? Obviously, *somebody* has to do the work, and I highly doubt that Jesus is suggesting we “outsource” the daily chores, or the work at the office, or the dusting, or -- especially -- the leadership of the church. Somebody has to do the work, and knowing Jesus as I believe that I do, *I don’t see him suggesting that we all stop doing the work we must do.*

The meaning of the Martha and Mary story becomes more complex, too, when we realize that, in the Gospel of Luke, this scripture falls directly after the story of the “Good” Samaritan, which we heard last week. In that story, Jesus tells the lawyer to “go and do likewise,” in reference to the humane actions of the Samaritan. In the story directly following it, today’s story of Martha and Mary, Jesus tells the two women that it is better to *be* than to *do*; better to sit at his feet than to worry about their prescribed roles in society.

So, for heaven’s sake (literally!), *which is it, Jesus?!?! Are we to go out into the world and perform charitable acts among our “neighbors,” be they friends, strangers, or enemies? Or are we to sit quietly at your feet and let the workaday world pass us by?*

This has always been a tension within the church. On Sunday mornings we enter beautiful church houses and lift our souls and our hearts to God through melodious song, quiet prayer, Word spoken, and sacraments administered. We “sit at the feet of Jesus,” listening for his voice in the words of our scriptures, and hearing those words interpreted from the pulpit, and in the words of our hymns and our prayers. *We play Mary.*

But surely Jesus would not cry foul against the “Marthas” who work hard in the Sunday School room, the church council, the food closet, or nursing a sick loved one. Indeed, we hear Jesus many times throughout the New Testament telling us to welcome the little children, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, help the poor. In short, we hear him telling us to *do*.

So, again, *why does he come down so hard on Martha* for doing her duty as a hostess rather than sitting “idly” at his feet?! We may draw closer to an answer when we hear again his words to Martha: “You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” Other Biblical translations use similar words, such as “anxious,” “troubled,” “careful.” In short, the point is not that Martha is *doing* too much. Jesus does seem to take a harsh tone with her, and his scolding may still have been confusing and painful to a woman who was trying to do her best. But his *words are gentle*. “Don’t worry about all that stuff! It’ll get done! *Right now* what is important is to listen to me. *Right now* what is important is to turn your heart toward God. Let go of your understandable anger toward your sister. Let go of your many tasks. *Focus on this one thing for now. Learn how to worship.*

This is a lesson we *all* need to learn. I frequently hear people talk about how busy our world has become, how no one seems to have time for anything anymore, how we’re always *going, going, going*. Even those of you who are retired live in a busier world than you once did. Hear now the words of Jesus: “*Slow down!*” Take time to listen, to take in the Word of God. Let go of the distractions, the worry. Yes, the work of God needs to be done, the church needs volunteers, and Sunday schools require teachers and a superintendent. But the *work* of God cannot get done until we are able to hear the *Word* of God first. We need to be able to slow down long enough to hear that Word, or the *work we do will have little meaning*. Hear, then, the words of Jesus: “You are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing.” *Let us now center on that one thing, as we focus our hearts in prayer.*