

One More for Mary and Martha

Read Luke 10:38-42

My oldest sister Pat has been in the process of moving into assisted living. It's such a tough transition to let go of her home that she loves and her prized possessions. Many of us, all of us sooner or later if we live long enough, enter into what I call the season of sorting. If you've visited my study you know I have a whole wall of book shelves filled with books, most of which I've actually read. Now as I approach retirement I'm sorting through them. I ask myself, "Will I ever read this one again?" If the answer is "no," I try to find a new home for that particular volume that I have no intention of holding on to. Sometimes we just have to let go of things and move on to what comes next. It is a process of de-cluttering, of making space for a new future, of choosing not to be weighed down by the past, of deciding to travel light. It is rarely easy.

If I were to ask you what is the one thing you could not or don't want to live without, what would it be? Your answer would probably depend upon your age or your life experiences. If you are young you might say, "My driver's license or my I Phone or Net-flix. If you are a little older you might want money or fame or power or a fat promotion. How about indoor plumbing or electricity? You might say, "I can't live without my husband or wife or my children." I've heard many people say the most important thing in life is your health. Others say, "I just want to be happy." Any number of things and people might take the top position among things you think you can't do without.

During the season of sorting, we all have to make choices. But that's not all. As we go through life most of us go through the process of "being sorted" as the British say. We act, decide, choose; but we are also acted upon by one greater than ourselves, by one who knows what we really need in order to live an abundant life.

In Martha we see a woman in the process of being sorted. Our story opens with her making what looks to be a very good choice. Jesus came to town and she invited him into her home. The Bible repeatedly reveals to us a culture that

placed a high premium on the gift of hospitality and even in our culture today, to be extended hospitality is a beautiful and precious gift. Hospitality makes you feel cared for and special as another person extends themselves to make you feel welcome in their personal space. It feels good to think that another thinks you are worth it!

So Martha set out to “put on the dog” for Jesus as we say today. Had she lived alone all might have gone according to plan. After making considerable noise with the pots and pans and laying before Jesus a scrumptious meal she could have expected a hearty vote of thanks and gratitude from this notable Rabbi. Everyone would see what a fine woman she was. She’d get the respect she deserved and a boost to her esteem. She could then bask in the glow of a job well done.

This is all so seductive in any culture, in any time in history, in any heart that is infected with what is called an achievement or performance orientation. Its name in theology is works righteousness. Spiritually we expect God to see how hard we are working to please God and to hear divine applause for a job well done. It all seems so logical and noble. The deception at the heart of the matter is the lie that you are only worth what you do, for others and for God.

Achievement orientation is a harsh task master because you are never really sure if you’ve done enough to gain the approval you so desire. When this malady becomes ripe, it blossoms into perfectionism. Now you can never let up, never make a mistake, never fall short, never get a “C” on your report card. Good enough is never good enough. You need to be perfect! Children who grow up under this system grow up to be wounded, needy adults who can’t handle any kind of rejection or disapproval.

Martha didn’t live alone. She had a sister named Mary, selfish little brat, not lifting a finger to help while Martha worked up a sweat on her brow and a snit in her soul. “Look at her there, sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to him speak of all that lofty stuff while I’m up to my elbows in flour and dish water.” I wonder if there were old wounds grown fetid by repetition over the years as Mary repeatedly left the chores for Martha to do. We don’t know and aren’t told. But

Martha's tactic wasn't to scold Mary but to scold Jesus. Whoops! What happened to that hospitality all of a sudden, all that awe and respect?

It really is remarkable that one of the frequent questions, no rather, accusations directed to Jesus was, "Don't you care?" That question is one of the most prevalent of human knee-jerk reactions when things aren't going our way. We pray and don't get the answer: don't you care. We find ourselves at sea like the disciples on the storm raging sea waking Jesus up with the question: don't you care that we are perishing. If you care, do something. If you are the Son of God save yourself and us too. If you are the Son of God, come down now from the cross; then we will believe."

This repeated accusation is hurled at Jesus despite the fact that he was continuously caring for hurting, broken, and oppressed people. He was persistently kind and compassionate. But the more he did, the more they demanded. Like Martha, we let Jesus into the living room, offer him a bowl of soup, and then expect him to meet all our demands, answer all our questions, satisfy all of our hungers, and make us happy. But Jesus didn't come to do all that. Jesus came to save sinners not sit at the head table at our pity parties.

Both sisters had a choice to make. Martha allowed worry and the resulting distractions which it spawned to cause her to spin out in many directions but the one direction in which she really needed to go. We find out that underneath, her hospitality was really not about Jesus but about her, the approval she craved and the applause of people who would marvel at what a good hostess she was. The kind of hospitality Jesus sought was that given by listening ears and receptive hearts that would welcome the good news he came to bring. To be surrounded by fretful service was not what Jesus needed.

Have you ever gone to a restaurant and had a server who rushed you through your meal, snatching your plate away before you ate your last bite or looking at your half empty plate and asking, "Are you still working on that?" I find such hyper service annoying at best. Sometimes I think the server believes they are doing a good job and giving the patron what they want, prompt service, but it

often just seems intrusive. Life is hurried and harried enough; let me eat in peace.

Jesus truly cared for Martha and in no way was trying to humiliate her but he desired so much more for her than the satisfaction she could glean from all that she was doing for Jesus. She had the cart before the horse. Christian service is a loving response to being loved just for who we are. Before we can love we need to discover that we are beloved. So Jesus said, "Martha, 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." Notice he said her name twice. Jesus was saying, "I see you, I really see you. I know you are trying so hard to please me, but you are missing the point and value of what I came to offer you as well as Mary. Make a better choice. Let go of your performance orientation. You are loved before you do even one chore on my behalf."

I've preached on this text many times over that last 41 years and every time I've been accosted at the exit following the service by all the women who both sympathize and identify with Martha. Evidently many Christians have lived through experiences in which they felt taken for granted, presumed upon, left out of the party going on in the living room while working away alone in the kitchen. The injustice stings the soul. People feel violated even when they are not noticed. This is not trivial. The pain is real. Why wouldn't Jesus take your side? Didn't he care?

Lots of people, both women and men, seek to show their love and extend hospitality by serving. In Martha's world she was simply carrying out what would have been expected within her conventional role. She was doing what women did, what was expected of a hostess.

And it's not as though Jesus was anti-servant hood. It was Jesus who told his disciples that whoever would be a leader had to be a servant. He said, "The Son of Man is among you as one who serves." It was Jesus who humbled the disciples by stooping down among them doing slave labor, washing their dusty, road-weary feet. It was Jesus who told them that the one who wanted to be

great among them must become the least and that the last would be first and the first would be last.

His teaching fell on fertile soil, for we read in Acts 6 that when the Apostles needed to appoint servers to help feed the fledgling church, they selected men who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom and laid hands upon them and prayed for them. They were in no way seen as inferior and therefore assigned permanent KP. They were honored and esteemed in their ministry. So if serving is not the issue then what is?

There is a hidden key there in plain sight. Would you like to know what it is? It is tied to the word “conventional.” Martha was performing according to convention, doing what was expected of her, whether she wanted to or not. It was Mary who was breaking out of her conventional role and acting like a fully legitimate disciple, sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to his teaching. That would have been highly unusual in that day.

And in Jesus’ approval the scene became both transformational for Mary and in due course for Martha, as well as being culturally and religiously subversive. Martha was trying to fight against convention using the inadequate tools of jealousy and resentment and self-pity. Jesus loved her too much to cater to that doomed strategy. He merely opened before her the freedom to choose. Mary did it Martha, why don’t you make a better choice too?

In Jesus’ ministry, women were most welcome and had an equal place at the table. The Gospel of Luke and Acts are often cited as the books of the New Testament most appreciative of the role of women in the works of God on earth. Women also appear in non-conventional roles throughout the New Testament as well. But conventions are often hard to break.

Religious conventions can be hardest of all. It wasn’t until the 1950s that women were permitted to be ordained as elders in the Presbyterian Church. Several years later our denomination experienced a major schism because a seminary graduate who refused to ordain women clergy was denied ordination.

Some of us joyfully watched the U.S. women's team win the World Cup soccer tournament last weekend. Many commentators have noted that their victory extends way beyond the pitch as these female athletes have gained a stage to advocate for women's rights and pay equal to professional male footballers. They aim to shatter the glass ceiling so many women encounter in their professions and break through to equality of opportunity and reward.

Mary at the feet of Jesus was no small thing. The heartening part of the story for Martha comes after her brother Lazarus was raised from the dead. When Lazarus was sick and Jesus delayed coming for two days, Lazarus died and by the time Jesus did arrive Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Martha had the same insinuation in her greeting: don't you care? After Lazarus was raised and close to the time of Jesus' passion, the friends were all gathered in Martha's home and we are simply told, "Martha served." Now there were no emotional pyrotechnics. Martha was finally sorted by the grace of God. She had become free to do conventional tasks with uncommon freedom.

In the end, Jesus sets us free to return to our lives and to serve full of joy and without a trace of resentment. It's not an easy journey to arrive there but it is worth the trip. To all you sorted Marthas out there I say peace be unto you.