

Pentecost 6C (7/21/2019)

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15-28

**Luke 10:38-42**

*Mary and Martha are not at odds with one another. Discipleship involves both attentiveness to Christ and active service for his sake. If there is a distinction to be made, it's not between contemplation and action, but between focus and distraction. Where will you fix your attention? Who will inform and motivate your actions? And, how will those actions serve the world God so loves?*

The story of Mary and Martha is not a story about women. It is uncommon in the way that it features women, and unexpectedly places a woman in the posture of a disciple, that is, at the feet of the Teacher. But it's not a story about women per se. Luke's relationship to women is complicated and not nearly as enlightened as his admirers might like to think. What's more, interpreters of this particular story have historically drawn problematic conclusions about women and discipleship. One traditional reading, for instance, sees Martha and Mary as archetypes or models<sup>1</sup> – the busy hostess on the one hand and the silent listener on the other. Because the central characters are women, the assumption is that these must be the two basic modes of women's discipleship, effectively barring other legitimate options, namely preaching, teaching, and other active leadership. But, if this story featured Peter and John instead, no one would suggest that it sets limits on the ways men should practice discipleship.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Jane D. Schaberg and Sharon H. Ringe, *Women's Bible Commentary*, 507.

<sup>2</sup> Matt Skinner, "Sermon Brainwave #672,"

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast\\_id=1165](http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1165).

No, the story of Mary and Martha is not a story about women. Neither is it a permanent criticism of Martha's approach to receiving Jesus. "Mary has chosen the better part," some interpreters have read, deciding that faith characterized by prayerful attentiveness to God is inherently superior to faith expressed in active service. Listening is "better" than serving; contemplation is "better" than action.

The problem with this reading is that the story of Mary and Martha follows on the heels of the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus' most famous exhortation to humble service. "Which of [the] three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Jesus asks. "The one who showed him mercy," his interlocutor answers, to which Jesus responds, "Go and do likewise."<sup>3</sup> In other words, faith becomes active in love; faithfulness to Jesus comes to expression in service to others. "The greatest among you must become like the [least]," he insists, "and the leader like one who serves."<sup>4</sup> It follows that **Martha's effort at hospitality is exemplary in its own right**, like the hospitality Abraham and Sarah offer the three heavenly visitors by the oaks of Mamre in our first reading from Genesis.

**Held together, the stories of the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha promote complementary aspects of discipleship – both contemplation and action, both faith and love.** Different occasions may call for a different balance of the two, but there's no need to drive a wedge between them.

---

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:36-37.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 22:26.

So, if Mary and Martha are not at odds with one another, then what sense do we make of Jesus' gentle redirection? "Martha, Martha," he soothes, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the [good] part, which will not be taken away from her." **Martha's problem is not her desire to serve, but her anxious distraction. Her heart is not in the wrong place, only her focus. Getting lost in the minutiae of providing hospitality, Martha loses sight of her guest, and the fundamental purpose of discipleship is obscured by other concerns.** As one interpreter observes, Martha refers to Jesus as "Lord," but she is intent on engaging his assistance in her plans rather than learning from him his.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, Mary perceives the significance of Jesus' presence and savors it, sitting at his feet and taking in every word he has to say. This doesn't mean that she neglects the more active aspects of discipleship. On the contrary, with her attention fixed on Jesus, her mind renewed, and her resolve strengthened, Mary is even better equipped to walk in the way of the faithful servant. She has chosen the "good part," or in the words of another interpreter, Mary has chosen "the connection to God who is good, the ground and energy of effective action."<sup>6</sup>

One sunny morning in June, I sat with seminary friends around a dining room table in Hyde Park listening to Cynthia Lindner, professor at University of Chicago Divinity School, expound on the work of ministry. She encouraged us to

---

<sup>5</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 437.

<sup>6</sup> John Shea, quoted by James A. Wallace, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 265-7.

join the conversation, which we did from time to time, but we preferred hearing mostly from her. Professor Lindner spoke in simple phrases, yet she illuminated some of the most complex and significant matters of church leadership seemingly without effort. She was wise, and she was inspiring.

Maybe you've known the joy, the exhilaration, the privilege of listening intently to a good teacher. Maybe you've had a critical conversation with a trusted mentor, read a compelling insight from a brilliant author, or had a sudden epiphany while listening to a podcast. If so, then you have a sense of the "one thing" Jesus commends in our Gospel from Luke today. **It's a question of discernment, of recognizing and receiving the truth as it presents itself to us amid the anxious distraction of our everyday lives.**

Dear church, **both Mary and Martha are faithful. Discipleship involves both attentiveness to Christ and active service for his sake.** The trick is not to miss the forest for the trees, not to become so preoccupied with our own concerns that we lose sight of Christ's presence and purpose in our lives. It's not that our day-to-day activity is insignificant, quite the opposite. It's a question of discernment, of focus. Where will you fix your attention? Who will inform and motivate your actions? And, how will those actions serve the world God so loves?