

Sermon: Hearing and Doing

How many times have you heard this story of Martha and Mary? But I'm sure that you've heard this particular story many times. I wonder, with each time that you heard the story, who do you identify with—Martha or Mary? Who in the story do you find most like yourself?

Now, I want to say something at very beginning that is very important for all of us to hear and to take to heart. When we hear this story of Martha and Mary, and we hear it—as we most often do—in isolation of any other part of Luke's Gospel; there is the temptation—actually it's a huge pitfall—for us to focus on Mary's actions as ALWAYS being those that should be the model to which we aspire. The fact is, the Gospel writer did not intend for that to be the case. Luke did not intend for this story to be heard in isolation. Luke did not intend for us to view our relationship with Christ Jesus as a simple, straight forward decision between being a Mary or a Martha.

Christ Jesus calls us to be both Mary and Martha depending upon the circumstances. AND he calls Mary to take on the role of Martha at times, just as he calls Martha to take on the role of Mary at times.

You see the story of Mary and Martha is the story of one person who “sees and does” and another person who “listens and hears.” The story of Mary and Martha is also a counterpoint to last week's Gospel about the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan was a person who saw his neighbor and did something because he loved his neighbor. The Good Samaritan was lifted up by Jesus as being an example of how we should follow his command to “love our neighbors as ourselves.” At the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, we're told to “Go and do likewise,” and that is end of the story—or so it seems.

Luke then immediately takes us to this wonderful lesson about Mary and Martha, but we need to hear this lesson not only for what it's saying about these two women, but also for what it's saying in juxtaposition to the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We need to understand these two stories in terms of “seeing and doing” AND “hearing and listening,” because both are important to our relationship with God.

Perhaps the biggest mistake we can make with this story of Mary and Martha is to view it as a Biblical definition of the role of women. That is not what

this lesson is about. What it IS about is discipleship. And in order to understand discipleship we need to listen to AND hear all of Jesus' words, without—as Jesus tells us—being “troubled by many things.” (10:41).

There are several things we need to see in this story of Mary and Martha before we can properly understand it in its complete context. The first thing we need to pay attention to is the role of Martha. In John's Gospel, we're told that Mary and Martha live with their brother Lazarus in the town of Bethany, a town that is only a short distance from Jerusalem. In fact, on a clear day you could see Jerusalem from Bethany. Here in Luke's Gospel, Lazarus is not mentioned; only Mary and Martha are important to the Gospel writer. That, in itself is interesting, since the society at that time was so incredibly male-dominated.

And it's in this absence of a male relative in the home, that we begin to get a sense of a secondary focus of the story. Martha does the inviting. We're told that “Martha received him into her home” (10:38). Her ownership of the home places her on a level of equality in a male-dominated society. Martha is definitely in charge of this encounter with Jesus. But in spite of her role as host—the one who has invited others into her house—she immediately takes on a very feminine role within the house. She begins to prepare a meal for all those who have been invited in. However we actually don't know who all is there, because the only ones mentioned are Jesus, Mary, and Martha; none of the twelve are mentioned at all.

But take note of what Martha is doing. She is in the same role as the Good Samaritan in last week's Gospel. She sees her neighbor—in this case Jesus—she senses a need—hunger—and she begins to care for her neighbor by preparing food.

Now, take note of Mary. What is she doing? The Gospel writer describes it this way, Martha “had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word” (10:39). In picturing this encounter between Mary and Jesus, we may have an image of Jesus seated in some sort of chair with Mary sitting on the floor—literally at his feet. But that image wouldn't be accurate from an historic standpoint; nor would it be accurate in a spiritual sense.

“Sitting at the Lord's feet” is a figurative, not a literal description. Jesus is most likely sitting on a rug or on cushions or pillows of some sort that are scattered on the floor for that purpose. Mary is also sitting on the floor, probably in front of Jesus—at his feet—while he is teaching. However, what

we need to understand is that this is the position of a student—a disciple; a position that is—in that time and in that place—one of honor usually reserved only for men. In this story, Mary has been placed in the position of an honored disciple to Jesus. She is actively engaged in being taught by him. Her discipleship at that point is one of listening to and hearing the word of God.

What Mary understands and Martha has failed to understand in this story is that God has been invited into their home. But Martha is busy doing all the things that are expected of her—the things she sees that need to be done. She is caring for a neighbor in her way—a neighbor who just happens to be God incarnate in the person of Jesus.

What has happened here is that Martha has been distracted by her own agenda—an agenda to serve. Martin Luther might refer to it as an “agenda to do good works.” But while she thinks she knows what Jesus needs at that moment, she has missed the point of his visit completely and in so doing, her discipleship has gone a bit off the rails for the moment. It doesn’t mean she isn’t a good disciple, it simply means she is momentarily misguided. While Martha’s agenda is to do things and to direct Jesus so that she might serve him better; Mary’s agenda is to sit quietly and follow Jesus’ agenda of teaching so that she might listen, hear, and learn.

But consider this idea for a moment. When Jesus was preaching the parable of the Good Samaritan, not only were the twelve around him, but we know from the text that precedes the parable that there were probably many other disciples around him. The seventy that he had sent out, had returned. They were quite likely hearing the story of the Good Samaritan as well. Were Mary and Martha there as well? Did Martha hear the command to love neighbor as much as self? Did Martha hear Jesus say, **“Go and do likewise?”**

If Martha had heard the parable, she very likely thought she was doing what was most needed at the time. She very likely thought she was right in asking Jesus to tell Mary to help her prepare the meal. The problem was that SHE—Martha—had made an assumption about what Jesus’ needs were and she missed understanding that Jesus was there—at that moment in time and in that place—to fulfill HER needs. She was working to feed him with physical food when he had come into her home for the purpose of feeding HER with a spiritual food—the word of God.

And I think this story of Mary and Martha, when considered in light of the parable of the Good Samaritan, serves as a spotlight on our own discipleship. There are times in our own discipleship that we see what must be done; we see our neighbor and we love our neighbor, so we follow Jesus' command to **"Go and do likewise." But we also have to be aware that there is a real need for balance in our discipleship.**

There is a time and a place for both the discipleship of Martha and the discipleship of Mary. We all want to follow Jesus' commands to **"Go and do likewise." We all want to serve the Lord and do his will. But we need to be careful that we don't assume that we know what Jesus wants us to do at every moment. Sometimes we need to sit back and listen to what Jesus has to say.**

Jesus says to Martha . . . and to us when we are in our Martha role . . . ". . . you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." That one thing is the word of God. Jesus is telling us to find balance in our discipleship. Most certainly, he wants us to serve others—to "go and do likewise." But he also knows that in order for our faith to grow and to be strong, we need to be fed spiritually with the words of life. We need to take time away from the distractions of life in order for us to find life. We need to allow ourselves that quiet time that will enable us to listen to, and hear God in our lives.

The Psalmist says it very well: "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:1).

And in being still and listening and hearing, we will know the love of God.

Concerning love FOR God and the Love OF God, Augustine once wrote:

**When I love, what do I love?
It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory
not the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes,
nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs,
nor the gentle odour of flowers and ointments and perfumes,
nor manna or honey,
nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh;
it is not these I love when I love my God.**

**Yet, there is a light I love and a food,
and a kind of embrace when I love my God—**

**a light, voice, odour, food, embrace of my inner man,
where my soul is flood lit by light which space cannot contain,
where there is sound that time cannot seize,
where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses,
where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen,
and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part.**

That is what I love, when I love my God.

It is the spiritual bond with God that Augustine is writing about. It is that spiritual bond with God that Mary encountered in her discipleship. It is that spiritual bond with God that we can only have through balance in our discipleship—a balance between a “seeing and doing discipleship” in which we pass on the love of God to others AND a “hearing and listening” discipleship in which we are fed by the Word of God. As Christian disciples, we need that balance; we cannot exist without that balance.

Let us pray

May the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior who knows our needs and calls on us to be fed by his word. Amen.

Scripture quotations from the World English Bible

★ Hymn “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” VU 264

WE RESPOND TO GOD’S LOVE

Offering Thoughts

Offering Hymn “What can I do? “ 2X

What can I do? What can I bring? What can I say? What can I sing?

I’ll sing with joy. I’ll say a prayer, I’ll bring my love. I’ll do my share.

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★ Prayer of Dedication

- ★ **So many gifts from you, O God: We look up, and the sky is alive with clouds and birds by day, countless stars by night. So many gifts for which to thank you,**
- ★ **Gracious God: we look around, and there are the friends who care for us, family members who love us. So many gifts for which to thank you,**
- ★ **Loving God: We look at our faith community, and there is worship to sustain us and Christ's example to inspire us.**
- ★ **So many gifts for which to thank you, Most Generous God.**
- ★ **And these are gifts given to work your purpose out in the world. We know that you will bless them. Amen (1)**

Prayers of God's Family

Gracious God, quiet our hearts. Still our busy minds that we may hear your voice. We thank you for the refuge we find here, for the inspiration we receive to carry your message of hope to people in our community. We pray for our church and the church worldwide....

Spirit of Holiness, reveal your love.

Author of Life, there are so many places in our world where life is broken by pain and suffering. Yet even in the darkness there is light. We pray for the Ukraine. Strengthen the resolve of the leaders and will of the people to pursue peace with justice. May your Spirit move as a mighty wind throughout our world to bring hope and healing. We pray for the world....

Spirit of Holiness, reveal your love.

God of goodness, we thank you for the people in our lives who make our journey richer by walking with us. Whether near or far, we remember friends and family. Watch over them and bless them. For those in our community who are hurting, hungry, lonely or sick, we ask that you hold them in your arms of compassion. We pray for those who are in special need....

Spirit of Holiness, reveal your love.

Faithful God, we pray for ourselves. You see our deepest needs; you know the desires of our hearts. We commit these things to you, knowing you are a

God of compassion and that you, who began good work in us, will be faithful to complete it. Hold us in faith and guide us. We pray to know you better, to love you more, and to walk with you always....

Spirit of Holiness, reveal your love.

We commend to you, most merciful and loving God, our very lives in the knowledge that you are with us now and always. We pray these prayers together, through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who taught when we pray to say: Our Father....

The Lord's Prayer

OUR FATHER, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, For ever and ever. Amen.