

An Unlikely Parable
 Luke 10:38-42
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This morning we are dealing with another very familiar story - Mary and Martha. We don't usually think of this story as a parable, do we? But look at how it starts - "Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered into a certain village, where a certain woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. And she had a sister named Mary." A certain woman and her sister are the focus of this story, that like other parables, has a surprising twist. Often when we hear a sermon on this story, Mary and Martha are pitted against each other, and Mary emerges as the clear winner every time. But once again, the story is more nuanced than that. So what might we learn new from this story today?

You probably know that Mary and Martha (and their brother Lazarus) were some of Jesus' closest friends. I picture their home as Jesus' home away from home, somewhere he could go and relax, somewhere he could enjoy generous hospitality. Jesus would never have disparaged Martha for working to extend hospitality - in fact - Jesus and his disciples depended on the generosity and hospitality of others throughout their travels. And did you notice that it is Martha that welcomes Jesus - not Lazarus or Mary - Martha is exercising authority here on behalf of the household.

So what is the deeper issue here? As the story opens, it appears that Martha is busy - overwhelmed really - with the many tasks that come with hosting unexpected company. I can't fault Martha a bit here, can you? Friends, if Jesus were coming to your house for dinner after church - and bringing 12 hungry disciples with him, wouldn't you be a bit overwhelmed? And I don't think I could serve the group hot dogs and chips on paper plates in the backyard either. If

Jesus were coming, I'd want everything to be just so ó I'd want to give him my best ó my best recipes, use our best china ó Martha ówe get it. And Jesus isn't upset with Martha for working on his behalf. In fact, the word for her service in this story is *diakonia* ó the same root word from which we get our word deacon. In Jesus' day, the word carried much the same range of meaning it does for us today. In fact, at the beginning of this chapter in Luke, Jesus appoints 70 disciples and sends them out in pairs to do the work of the kingdom. To serve. In many ways, Martha is exactly the type of person Jesus would want to be on one of the teams. She has a servant's heart and she is committed to seeing a job through.

But on this day, it seems that Mary, Martha's likely partner in service, has abandoned her - and Martha is left to handle the service on her own. Where is Mary? Sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him teach. Can you imagine Martha when she realizes this? Can you hear what is going through her mind? "Well, I'd like to be in the family room soaking up Jesus' teaching too, but somebody has to feed this crowd."

What happens next fascinates me. Martha's frustration boils over, I picture her marching into the living room, hands on hips, where she interrupts Jesus' teaching to complain about her sister. Does that seem as nervey to you as it does to me? I'm pretty non-confrontational, and I'm not sure I would have had the courage to interrupt Jesus. I would have probably just stewed in the kitchen and given Mary the silent treatment the rest of the day. The fact that Martha is comfortable interrupting Jesus lets us know that Jesus is family, not company, it speaks to the bond and intimacy that this adopted family shared.

After the parable of the Good Samaritan, what would the people in the room have expected from Jesus? It would have been ideal if he had said, "Sorry Martha, we'd didn't mean to stick you with all the work, we'll all take a break and help you," but it is the first century after

all. A more realistic expectation would have been for Jesus to remind Mary that she should be helping her sister serve. Remember, Jesus doesn't fault Martha for her hospitality or he is upset because she has allowed herself to become distracted and overwhelmed.¹ He is upset that she has lost the joy she found in her service. "It's not worth that," Jesus is saying. But this is where the twist of this parable comes in.

Instead of doing what Martha asks, Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better thing, and he won't take it away from her. As much as I can't blame Martha for being upset, I can't blame Mary for wanting to be where she is either. Many years ago, my husband was on staff at a very conservative church in FL so we had been invited to the pastor's home one evening. I was looking forward to the four of us or the two couples- talking about our ministry and other important theological matters. But when we got there, it was made abundantly clear that the men would have a theological conversation in the library while the women were relegated to the kitchen. I admit, I was disappointed, hurt, and even angry. Mary was braver and bolder than I was then. Not wanting to cause a scene, I acquiesced and went to the kitchen.

But Mary held her ground. She wanted to sit at the feet of her beloved Jesus, she wanted to hear him teach and to be in on the discussion. Sitting at the Lord's feet was a common term for discipleship or she wanted in. She didn't care that it broke the social conventions of the day, it didn't matter to her that some didn't think she should be there or that she had left Martha with no help ---- and it didn't matter to Jesus either. Once again moving walls and going against convention, Jesus affirms Mary's right to be there, to be a disciple.

As I mentioned earlier, often when we hear this story preached, Mary and Martha are pitted against each other, and Martha comes up the loser. But John Donahue and other New Testament scholars assert that this is not how we should interpret this story.

You see, the true power of this story comes in interpreting it together with the story of the Good Samaritan that we talked about last week. First, Jesus tells a man - a lawyer who is used to sitting in the seat of power, to love his neighbor - to go and do *ó* to offer hospitality and service.. Then he breaks social convention by affirming a woman's right to sit and be, to love God and grow in discipleship. Taken together, these two parables really are subversive.

Taken together, these stories beautifully illustrate the greatest commandments *ó* to love God and love our neighbor. Taken together, these stories tell us that true discipleship is not only sitting at the feet of the Lord and listening and learning and it is not only serving our neighbor - it's both/and. In order to be able to **do**, we have to have the foundation that only comes from sitting at the feet of the Lord. We are commanded to do, but first we have to be with God *ó* to know God and love God. We are to live our lives in balance.

Jesus modeled this for us, didn't he? Throughout the gospels we often find him withdrawing from the crowds to pray and commune with God. These times empowered him to manifest the love of God to those who needed it each and every day.

Reflection questions:

Living this life of balance isn't easy is it? In your own life, is it easier for you to sit at Jesus's feet and grow in your discipleship or is it easier for you to love and serve your neighbor? Often this has to do with our passion and our giftedness, and it is okay to lean one way or the other.

But God does call us to both *ó* loving God and neighbor. For those of you who find it easier to sit at Jesus's feet, how might God be calling you to engage with your neighbors *ó* all of them?

For those of you who live out your passion by serving the world, what do you need to do to give yourself time to nurture your own relationship with God?

As a congregation, we have identified that we have been too inwardly focused these last several years. We've been concerned with the life of the church *ó* perhaps to the detriment of both true discipleship and service to our neighbors. In order to thrive in the future, we will need to learn to

live into both of the greatest commandments ó to love God and to love neighbor ó in new and creative ways.

ⁱ In this sermon I draw on the work of John R. Donahue in *The Gospel in Parable*, p. 134 and ff.