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Setting the Table & Sitting at the Table

Luke 10:38-42

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Like the biblical character, Lazarus, I have two sisters. When we were growing up, my mother would sometimes say to us, “It’s not just what you say, it’s how you say it.” It’s also true — it’s not just *what* you do, it’s *how* you do it. The Apostle Paul speaks of this in *1 Corinthians 13*, which begins with Paul listing different gifts we can use in service to others, but he says that if they aren’t exercised in love, we gain nothing. We can prepare a delicious meal and a beautiful table, but if they aren’t prepared in love, we can be as annoying as a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.

Have you ever had the experience of being in someone’s home for dinner and hearing a cutting remark or something said with a resentful edge? How do you feel when you suddenly realize that you’re in the middle of a family disagreement? When you’re at dinner at someone’s house and you can sense that one person is annoyed or angry at the other person for some reason, and it’s uncomfortable — suddenly, it’s the last place you want to be.

Today, we’re going to hear a story where Jesus finds himself in a situation like that. Like last week, this scene features Jesus and two individuals, who respond to him differently. Before I read it, I want you to think about how you feel when you have an important person in your life coming to your home for dinner. What do you do to prepare for their visit? How do you feel? What are you hoping will happen?

Luke 10:38-42, “Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named **Martha** welcomed him into **her home**. She had a sister named **Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying**. But **Martha** was **distracted** by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘**Lord, do you not care** that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘**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.’”

It’s always important to read and interpret a verse or passage of scripture in context. This story about Martha and Mary comes immediately after Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, and it needs to be heard in tandem with that passage. Jesus tells

the expert in the law of Moses to get out of their study and **go do mercy**. Show compassion. Help meet someone's need. Luke places this story about Martha, a woman who is so busy serving that she doesn't hear the Word, after the parable. To the man, Jesus says go and do; to the woman, Jesus says sit, listen, and learn. There are times to act and serve, and times to be attentive and listen. **We need discernment and wisdom to know what time it is and what's needed at any given moment.**

This scene is only found in Luke's Gospel. In *John 11*, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus are presented as close friends and followers of Jesus. This is the first time any of them have appeared in the Gospels. Martha shows Jesus hospitality, while Mary sits at his feet. This is consistent with what we see in *John 11*, where Martha takes the initiative to go out and meet Jesus and to speak with him, while Mary remains sitting in the house. The two women embody different aspects of Christian discipleship in Luke's Gospel, and both are positive characters. They're both doing good things. There's no villain in this story.

But ultimately, Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better part, and this represents a tension point for most of us. Why is Jesus, who just told the parable of the Good Samaritan, now saying that sitting at his feet is a better thing to do than serving? Does Luke think contemplative practices, such as prayer and study, are better than active practices, like hospitality and service? I don't think so. Let's go deeper, and look at each woman's actions.

First, **Martha** is described as welcoming Jesus into **her home**. Luke's statement that Martha opened **her home** to Jesus implies that Martha was an independent woman and financially stable. Martha may be a widow, because there's no mention of her husband. She owns and manages her house. If she had lived with her brother, Lazarus, or her husband, Luke would have said "Lazarus' house" or mentioned her husband's name, but he doesn't.

In first-century Palestine, eating together was an invitation to be a part of the family circle, and the women's role was to do all the cooking and food preparation. It would have been very unusual for women to join male guests before they were done with all the food preparation. In that culture, failing to be a good hostess meant disrespecting the guest. Martha was showing Jesus hospitality by receiving him and preparing a meal for him. Earlier in this chapter (*Luke 10:9*), Jesus tells his disciples that those who

welcome them will be blessed and that the Kingdom of God has come near to them. Welcoming is the act of a true disciple in Luke. Martha is doing the right thing. She's striving to provide the kind of hospitality that Simon, the Pharisee, had failed to show Jesus.

Her sister, **Mary**, is described as sitting at Jesus' feet, while listening to his words. It would have also been very unusual for a first-century Jewish woman to join men in learning. Just as the parable of the Good Samaritan shocked those who first heard it because they didn't expect Jesus to say that a Samaritan — an enemy of the Jews — would show mercy and be their neighbor and succeed where their religious leaders failed, Luke shocks his audience, again, because Jesus welcomes Mary to sit at his feet and learn from him, like his male disciples. The Apostle Paul describes himself as sitting at the feet of his teacher, Gamaliel, in *Acts 22:3*. The theme of listening to the Word of the Lord is a recurring one in Luke and Acts, and is a core part of authentic discipleship (*Luke 5:1; 6:47; 7:29; 8:14, 21; 10:16; 11:28; 14:35; Acts 2:22; 4:4; 10:22; 13:7, 44; 15:7; 19:10; 20:28*). Luke presents two sisters and two disciples. Both of their actions — welcoming and showing hospitality, and listening to Jesus — are the actions of a true disciple.

The trouble, then, is not what either sister has done. The trouble comes when we're told that Martha is distracted by many things. These distractions are understandable, as Martha juggles a household and serving the Lord. She turns to Jesus and asks, "**Lord, do you not care...?**" This is one of only two times in the Gospels when someone says to Jesus, in a moment of exasperation, frustration or desperation, "**Do you not care?**" The other time is in *Mark 4:38*, when the disciples are in a boat with Jesus during a storm, and they're frightened and afraid, and Jesus is sleeping. "**Lord, do you not care...?**" is a phrase many of us have probably said, or thought, in a moment of need or anger. Martha's upset that Jesus hasn't asked Mary to do what a woman was expected to do, in that time and place, which was to help. This is understandable, and I think we're supposed to sympathize with Martha in her request. She's working hard and needs a hand. The food isn't going to prepare and serve itself.

But, by making this request, she's forcing Jesus to choose between the two good behaviors: either telling Mary to stop listening and help her sister, or rejecting Martha's plea. But Jesus flips the script on her, and us, by telling her that she's worried about

many things, but only a few things — indeed, only one thing — is needed (*Luke 10:42*). Mary, he tells her, has chosen the better part, one that will not be taken away from her.

The problem wasn't that Martha was serving, it was the spirit in which she was serving. **She was distracted by the wrong things. She became focused on the fact that her sister wasn't helping.** Like the older brother in the Parable of the Loving Father with Two Sons in *Luke 15*, or the Pharisee in the Parable of the Tax Collector in *Luke 18:9-14*, **Martha is focused on the actions of others and their perceived shortcomings, as opposed to focusing on her own relationship with Jesus.** It's this misplaced focus, not her service or her hospitality, which leads to Jesus' gentle rebuke. Mary has chosen God as her portion, and that will never be taken away.

In this way, the story of these two sisters serves as an example for disciples today. Luke isn't attempting to prioritize one act of Christian discipleship over another. He presents the idea that **we can do good things, but do them in the wrong spirit or with the wrong attitude, and be distracted by the wrong things.** We can focus on the perceived shortcomings of those around us, rather than on our own relationship with Jesus. When we were at the Biennial in Omaha, two weeks ago, the fire alarm in our hotel went off after midnight, during our final night there. It was very loud, and got your attention immediately. Every time you find yourself distracted because you're thinking about what someone else is doing or isn't doing, or you find yourself doing something good but you can sense anger, annoyance, or frustration rising inside you, it should be like an alarm bell that you've lost your focus on Jesus.

You may have heard a preacher, or Bible study leader, criticize Martha for not acting like her sister, Mary, who listens to Jesus' teaching, but we need to understand Martha's behavior from a woman's perspective. Martha is exhausted by the burden of hospitality. She asks Jesus whether he cares that Mary left her alone to serve the guests. She asks Jesus to tell Mary to assist her. Martha's complaint is fair. Jesus gently acknowledges Martha's exhaustion, and reminds her of her distraction. He praises Mary for choosing to listen to his teaching.

Does Jesus value Mary's choice over Martha's? I don't think so. Remember, the Gospel of Luke was written several decades after the events it describes took place. Early churches were meeting in the homes of people like Martha. At a larger level, this passage

is not so much about two sisters, as it is **about the two kinds of ministries in the life of a disciple and the church: service and the Word**. Martha represents the ministry of service, and Mary represents the ministry of the Word. Jesus doesn't prefer the ministry of the Word over service. But Jesus doesn't want service to be at the expense of the ministry of the Word. Both ministries are important. The ministry of service shouldn't absorb all our energy and time and drive us to neglect God's Word, and the Word of God should motivate us to engage in the ministry of service.

In *Acts 6*, the church is growing rapidly, and the increase of disciples expands the responsibilities of the apostles. Consequently, the ministry of service absorbs more of their time. They're unable to serve all the widows in need of food (*Acts 6:1*). The apostles state, *"It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables"* (*Acts 6:2*). The disciples called seven deacons to take responsibility for serving the widows and making sure their needs were met. Stephen and Philip were two of the seven deacons. Later in their ministries, they engage in the ministry of the Word. Stephen testifies about his faith before the Jewish leaders (*Acts 6:8-14*), and Philip witnesses to, and baptizes, a man from Ethiopia (*Acts 8:26-40*). The twelve apostles, Stephen, and Philip demonstrate that the ministry of service flows from learning and meditating on the Word of God.

The apostles and the seven deacons respond positively to Jesus' call to ministry. Likewise, Mary positively responds to Jesus. She chooses to learn from him. It's possible that Mary engaged in the ministry of serving after spending time learning from Jesus. In this moment, she chooses to draw near to Jesus. Jesus describes Mary's choice as a good part that will not be taken away from her **because learning God's Word should always inspire believers to serve in love**. Martha positively responds to Jesus, too. She hosts him and his disciples in her home. Jesus doesn't ask Martha to give up the ministry of serving; instead, he intends to relieve Martha from her anxiety and exhaustion by inviting her to join her sister in learning from him. Then, she can resume her hospitality with her sister.

In Luke and Acts, **disciples serve, and listen to and share the Word**. We're also called to engage in contemplative practices, like study and prayer, and active practices of serving and hospitality. There's a legend about Martha of Bethany that was popular in the Middle Ages. In the story, which takes place after the resurrection of

Jesus, she becomes a traveling preacher and ends up in a small town in France that, unfortunately, has a chronic dragon problem. She manages to slay the dragon and, in doing so, wins the whole town over to Christianity. In that story, her sister, Mary, on that same trip, ends up starting a monastery in the wilderness, meaning they both live out the roles assigned to them in Christian history: Martha acts and Mary studies. Martha represents an active faith, while Mary represents a contemplative faith.

Luke's deeper concern is that our focus be in the right place — that we focus on Jesus and let the main thing be the main thing. If we criticize Martha too quickly or harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and then we'd have no church breakfast this morning and no church picnic this evening! If we commend Mary too much, she may sit there forever and never put her faith into action, just like the lawyer Jesus critiqued with the parable of the Good Samaritan. We need to use discernment to know when it's time to go, do, and serve, and when it is time to sit, listen, and reflect.

Immediately following this story in Luke's Gospel, Jesus goes to pray, and the disciples ask of him, "Teach us to pray." The movement back and forth from contemplation to action never stops. One spurs the other. The ministry of the Word and prayer and the ministry of service need each other, and all of it is to be done in love. Everything we do is to be done in love and not from a sense of obligation. If we go to Bible study every week and spend much time in prayer, if we serve faithfully day after day and week after week, but we fail to do it in love, we gain nothing, and we don't reflect the spirit of Christ. If we constantly fall into the distraction trap of focusing on what we perceive to be other people's failures and shortcomings, we're missing the point. In love, Jesus invites us to sit at his feet and learn from him. In love, he invites us to rise and share hospitality, mercy, and compassion, as we serve others in his name. In love, he invites us to become more like him every day.

Blessing: Let all that you do be done in love. *1 Corinthians 16:14*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you think motivated Martha's actions, and what do you think motivated Mary's? How do their different responses reflect their understanding of discipleship?
2. Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better part." What do you think "the better part" means in this context? How might that apply to your life today?
3. Martha was "worried and distracted by many things." What are the things in your life that tend to distract you from being present with God?
4. How do you balance "doing" for Jesus (service, responsibility) with "being" with Jesus (prayer, listening, rest)? How are both part of discipleship?
5. If Jesus visited your home today, how might you respond? Would you relate more to Martha or Mary? Why?
6. What does this passage teach us about hospitality, spiritual priorities, and listening to God? How can we cultivate a heart like Mary's without neglecting necessary responsibilities?