

Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ 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." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

I will be honest with you. Today's passage is not a favorite of mine. So I spent a lot of this week making frustrated noises and wrestling with a text that I've heard way too often.

I'm sure many of us know the story by heart. In this chapter of Luke, Jesus has just given a sermon to the seventy two new disciples, who are being sent out two by two to different towns. And Jesus tells them to completely rely on the hospitality of those who live there.

And then Jesus continues on his travels. And he arrives in a certain village where two sisters welcome them into their home. It might seem a little unusual these days, but this was a cultural norm at the time. Hospitality to guests was considered a top priority in Jesus' time. Before the world knew of stranger danger, it was considered very normal and expected to invite traveling strangers into your house and provide food and shelter. And the gospel of Luke is full of these

examples of hospitality, especially over a meal. And what Martha is doing to prepare for this meal is a beautiful thing. This was her way of showing reverence and respect.

Martha is busy making the bread, cleaning the cloth, finding the wine. After all, soon it would be dinnertime and her guest would be hungry. And Jesus's visit was unexpected, so she didn't have much time to plan this out. She was going about a normal day, and then this man named Jesus comes to her town, and she went into host mode and invited him into her house. In Martha's mind, everything had to be perfect for the most esteemed guest that they would ever have.

And task after task runs through her head. There's no way she can get them accomplished in time. And she looks over at her sister, who is completely unaware of her sister in need, just listening to Jesus at his feet. Sitting like that, like a disciple, that was a role reserved only for a man. Women were supposed to be in the kitchen, where Martha was. They weren't supposed to be sitting in front of the teacher. And how could Mary be so obtuse? Martha needs help!

All of Martha's frustration came to a head, and she takes action. Oddly enough, she doesn't go to Mary. She rushes over to Jesus and interrupts his conversation. We're really not sure if there were other people in the room besides her sister, and we're not sure if Martha does this quietly so as not to embarrass her sister. But she brings it to Jesus' attention in an exasperated tone. Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? A sort of passive aggressive form of tattle-taling. Tell her to help me, she says.

And Jesus' response is surprising. He says, Martha martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but there is only need for one thing. Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her.

Martha is left feeling even more frustrated than before, but now with an extra helping of guilt. She's left feeling like the naïve outsider, when all she was doing was making sure she could feed her guests. And her sister Mary is still sitting there in a place she doesn't belong, and Jesus says she is doing something right.

If I was Martha, frankly, I would have walked out to take a deep breath and prevent myself from saying something I'd regret later. Like, well you can make your own casserole, goodbye! I'm going to Taco Bell! ... Or something along those lines.

When you look at artistic depictions of this scene, the artists really play on this tension between the sisters. Just look at the front cover of today's order of worship. That is an image straight from a soap opera, and it certainly paints Martha in a negative, almost vindictive light.

Does anyone else feel like Martha gets a bad reputation after this passage?

This kind of sibling rivalry comes out in several storylines in our Bible, our culture, our art. Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, in history we have Cleopatra and her

brother Ptolemy, the Boleyn Sisters Anne and Mary. These rivalries make for rich content that shows up in our television and movies all the time. We love rivalries, we love them in sports, our politics is often fueled by them, and of course the shows we watch.

But this Mary and Martha rivalry is much more subtle. And we're not sure if it ever existed at all in their own life as sisters. And I would go so far to say that this rivalry between Martha and Mary was invented, created out of thin air, a rivalry between two sisters who represent two different aspects of our faith.

I've mentioned already that I get very frustrated with this text. It's mostly due to how this text was taught to me in years previous.

This past week in my research I saw bloggers who identified themselves as "More Mary, less Martha," playing on the concept that this author is more one than the other. This week I came upon article after article about 'how do you know if you're a Mary or a Martha,' entire Bible studies series based on these two characters whose character development spans all of five verses. Mary and Martha also show up in the Gospel of John with the resurrection of their brother Lazarus, and Martha proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God. In chapter 12 of John, Mary takes a pound of very expensive perfume and pours it at Jesus' feet, making Judas very angry. But this particular story that we study today from the tenth chapter of Luke always seems to stand out as what defines the two women. When I ask my friends, what do you

think of that Mary and Martha story in the Bible, they know exactly which one I'm referring to without any scripture reference. This story defines these two women.

Now when I was learning this text in Sunday School or in a women's bible study, I was asked to choose which one I was. Perhaps when you read this text, you naturally wondered which one would you be. It's a very natural inclination. A lot of bible studies that I've gone through ask the question, which one are you? And often feel pressured to choose. Now men, I know this text could feel alienating, and you've probably zoned out by now. But this text is not just about women, so bear with me. So what do I mean between choosing between Mary and Martha, or Matthew and Mark for you fellows? Let me give you an illustration.

If you're a Martha, you're supposedly extroverted, you like to be busy, you like to-do lists, you like to be the boss, you like cooking and cleaning and hosting parties, you're diligent, you get things done, you're driven.

If you're a Mary, you're supposedly quiet. You're introverted. You're often behind the scenes. You prefer quiet prayer. You don't really like to-do lists, you prefer relationships over to-do lists, hospitality is something you value but not something that comes naturally to you.

But there's an enormous problem with this approach. This text has been used improperly many a time, fueling the fire of a rivalry between two kinds of people and lifting up one as the wiser, better winner. First off, it makes major assumptions about two people who get five verses of

character development. And it almost always classifies one of those people, i.e. Martha, as in the wrong.

But more importantly, it puts two different types of being, two different types of worship, two different types of acting out our faith, it puts those two in opposition with each other, acting as if they cannot exist together, and acting as if one is better than the other. It creates a false dichotomy between the two, an unnecessary rivalry.

You see Martha represents the active life in this scene, or the *vita active*. She represents things that you physically do to live out your faith, things like serving others, hospitality, getting stuff done. She represents the belief that faith equals action, that you show your Christian belief by your deeds, by being selfless and going out of your way to help others.

Mary represents the contemplative life, or (totally going to butcher the pronunciation on this) *vita contemplativa*. The life of study, prayer, quiet meditation, spending time in deep thought and conversation with God. The idea that you deepen your faith through the mind and heart, through intense study and a servant like devotion to the written word of scripture. The contemplative life means you live out your faith through an intentional sabbath and by putting aside all the duties and to do lists you're your normal life requires. Medieval theologians believed that the contemplative life was far more important than the active, and used this story of Mary and Martha as an example. But I have to disagree with those medieval theologians on this one.

Because in actuality, we need both to have a healthy active faith.

But having both requires a healthy balance, and most of our time we spend dabbling between the two. Often we may feel like we are much better at one than the other, or that we can practice our faith more earnestly with one or the other.

The somewhat convenient thing is that we can sort of tell when we are only putting one “life” of our faith into practice. That’s when things start to feel out of balance, or when we start to lose control.

For example, with our own Martha. It’s fairly easy to see where Martha made her mistake in our text. She got a little too caught up in her culture’s value of hospitality and in the value of her own “doing.” She was too caught up in the “active life” of her faith. She put so much worth in what she was accomplishing that she believed her sister, who simply sat with Jesus, wasn’t doing any worthwhile. In that moment of exasperation with her sister, she lost sight of the other things that are important. I believe a lot of us can sympathize with Martha. Maybe you, like Martha, are in your kitchen, overwhelmed with preparing for your guests and a complete lack of help. Maybe you’re in an Ikea, the very store where many a meltdown has occurred, trying to get all the items you need for re-doing a few things in your house and you find yourself snapping at your spouse over a lamp cord *guilty* , that might be a time to let the to-do list go and walk away and get some coffee together instead. Or maybe you’re stuck in traffic on a

really busy day when you're jumping from one thing to the next, and you're cursing the existence of a stranger in the car in front of you, maybe its time to take a step back and rest with the presence of God.

But on the other hand, if all we do is dwell in our contemplative life, if there's no action in our faith at all, then we just live in our own world, in our own head. We may have a deep relationship with God, but how do we live that out in our lives? How do we help effect change? Nothing would get done without our active life. We would talk a big talk, learn a lot, grow deeply intellectually, but what would we do when an unexpected guest knocks on our door?

Theologian Gerald C. May says it well when he says "to pray as if all depends on divine action is to support passivity and self-suppression. To labor as if all depended on our own effort is to court willfulness in a dangerous way...it is both that are demanded if one's spiritual journey is to be meaningfully reflected in life."

You need both action and contemplation for a healthy faith life. You need to be rooted in the Spirit and listen for what God is saying, but if God is calling you to act, you need to be able to act just like Martha did. But remember, if these acts of service and discipleship burden and exasperate you, remember in whose presence you should rest. Sit at his feet and rest in his presence. Amen.