



Different Strengths, Same Goal

Luke 10:38 – 42

July 21, 2019

Rev. Rebecca M. Heilman

“Where do you find yourself in this story?” This is a question my professor would ask after every narrative we read in my class. This simple question, of “where do you see yourself in the story” would stretch my self-awareness. There were days when I felt lower than low identifying with the troubled disciples. And there were those pompous days where I identified with Jesus. I never really liked those days either. Then there were those days that I didn’t see myself in the story at all. So, I ask you as you listen to Luke 10, where do you find yourself in this story today?

Starting with Verse 38, Luke writes, 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. ^[1] Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

I am the youngest of three. And because I am the youngest, I learned everything from my older brother and sister. My life was pretty easy as the youngest, sorry all you older siblings out there! When my little feet couldn’t keep up with my siblings, my brother would carry me on his shoulders. And when I couldn’t form words...no worries...my sister was so good at talking, she just talked for me and even for my brother. And so because I was so so young and observed and learn

everything from my siblings who argued like any siblings would, I learned to mimic how to tattle-tell even before I could form my words. There’s a story that my mom will easily tell anyone, you ask her when she visits next, of me being around a year and a half to two years old, running up to her, shaking my little finger and pointing the other at my siblings while rambling random sounds mimicking how they have tattled on each other before. This went on for most of my childhood. I was the tattle-tell because I was the youngest and I observed and was pick on and felt all the things my siblings did to me and to each other. It’s not so much that way anymore in our relationships, thank goodness.

When we got to this story of Mary and Martha in class, I remember discussing and joking that I am a Martha living in a Mary world and that this story pushes and pulls at me in all sorts of directions. I am Martha through and through. Not only in how we perceive her to be a tattle tell, but also because she is a worker bee. Kathy Hoffman can tell you, when I get to the Open Table meal, it’s all hands-on deck, I am ready to work. This is not a story I enjoy, I’ll be honest, and maybe some you feel that way too. It’s easy to feel that way while living in New York City, a busy city with lots of worker bees. Martha is not portrayed well. One woman is belittled over the other for her work and then sister is against sister, at least at the initial read. But the initial read is not fair to either Mary or Martha. For if we compare them, as we so often do, we’re do little service to both women and to the interpretation of this text.

Context is everything to this story if we are to understand it clearly. At the beginning of this chapter, chapter 10, Jesus sends out around 70

disciples in pairs to every town and place to do God's ministry. And then just a few verses later, we have the passage we read last week where Jesus converses with a lawyer about what it means to love your neighbor and to love God. And follows with Jesus telling the parable of the Good Samaritan where there is the act of doing; and doing good and loving service to one's neighbor. When Jesus finishes the story, he says, "Go and do likewise." And they are sent off again to do, do, do.

And so Jesus and those with him, went on their way, where they were welcomed by Martha into her home...yes Martha's home! This already links us back to the beginning of the chapter, for the "work of Jesus and his disciples, and the mission they are on, clearly depended on the hospitality extended to them by people like Martha and Mary"¹ This visit with Martha and Mary is more than a pit stop. It's more than a place for nourishment, for rest. By Martha "welcoming" or "receiving" him into her home, Martha embraces Jesus' mission. Her welcoming Jesus with hospitality was her way of showing her openness to the word and work of God that is about to take place. And as we read, Mary demonstrates this openness and welcome to God's mission differently.

Mary shows a different type of hospitality. Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, which already shows that Jesus brings a sort of liberation to women at that time because women were not allowed to study the Torah. The Greek says, Mary was listening, *ekouen*, which is the imperfect tense to show that Mary was listening with intense concentration. Her entire self was present with God's words. And so with Martha opening the doors of her home and Mary intensely listening to Jesus, Adele Reinhartz, a theologian, suggests, "we have come upon Martha and Mary in the very act of conversion."² Something is happening here. Luke included this brief story in his Gospel for a reason.

And the story continues, Mary's intense concentration is in contrast with Martha's distraction of many tasks or translated more literally as "much service."³ Martha is distracted. She is pulled away,

quite busy, she is overburdened by this "much service". And I don't mean to go into multiple Greek lessons today, but these Greek words are key to interpreting the text. The word "service" in Greek is *diakonia* and it's a bit controversial in its meaning. For *diakonia* or "service" can be associated with food service, such as preparing a meal, serving the food, but it can also mean "Christian ministry". The controversy here is how do we translate this word and how we view Martha in this story? When you lay out how often this word, *diakonia* or "service" has been used in the New Testament, you find that it is used more as a word for Christian service or ministry than for the alternative translation of food service. And this passage, does not place Martha in the kitchen. Absolutely not. Frances Taylor Gench enlightens her readers to it's possible, "interpreters may have projected into the story their own assumptions about women's roles."⁴ It's possible, that Martha is engaged with a more "eucharistic table service and proclamation of the word" instead of the service of food.⁵ A powerful statement that Martha is doing the work of God. But regardless of whether it's food preparation or ministry itself, Martha is distracted and goes to Jesus to say, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" Jesus responds to Martha's words of complaint about her sister's lack of helping with "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset by many things..." It's common for Luke to write like this, using names twice. Luke does this to call the person to Jesus' attention and then to imply a gentle reprimand. Another way of saying it is, "Martha, my beloved Martha, you are worried and upset by many things...and here's the kicker that is easy to miss, Jesus is not reprimanding Martha for her service, her ministry, or even her serving at all, his reply is about the way it is done. He is replying about the way her ministry has been done with fuss and agitation.

As you may well know, probably from all the later night committee meetings, or emergency shelter calls, or when we run out of sandwiches at our Open Table, or when that person didn't RSVP and now we may not have enough food, or when another person experiencing homelessness comes up to you for help,

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 57.

² Gench, 60.

³ Gench, 60.

⁴ Gench, 61.

⁵ Gench, 61.

as you know from all of this...ministry can be exhausting. It can be so so filling, and then it can be absolutely draining. It can be joyful and it tug at our hearts, then it can be time consuming. It can be communal and full of laughter and shoulders to cry on and then it can be just meetings after meetings after meetings. And so in those moments of ministry that we all know, we are likely to find ourselves like Martha, distracted, anxious, and depleted by too many tasks. And let us not forget, on top of all that we do here, there are the many detractions in our everyday lives from the debilitating breaking news to the bill that may need to wait one more week until it can be paid. Or the parent or spouse or child that needs our constant watch. Distractions like social media and distractions like that last-minute email before bed. Distractions like making a to-do list and then getting too distracted to even check it off. Maybe we get to that point where we ask, why do we even do this? Why do we do this to ourselves?

Rev. Dr. Rebecca L Davis, my professor of Christian Education in college often told us in regard to ministry, “form follows function”. What she means by that is we need the organization, the words, the Word, and then why we do things. If we don’t have the why, we can’t move on to the how. All of these types of distractions, yes even the distractions of wanting to do good ministry, can keep us from seeing the why we do good ministry. Where do we get our theology? What is our theology and reason for doing the work? What is it in us that makes us want to do the “much service” like Martha? In this story, Jesus says, we can find the why by maybe sitting at his feet for a while.

And so Martha is distracted, she’s anxious and upset. She’s burned out by her ministry and Jesus is concerned for her soul and how she is currently doing her ministry. He may be suggesting that there is a time to rest, find rejuvenation, find that passion again, reflect on why we do this, and always listen to and for God’s words. Turid Karlsen Seim says, “It can thus be claimed that the fundamental antithesis is not between hearing and serving (in this story), but between hearing and agitated toil.”⁶ God through Jesus is calling Martha to attention. God is calling Martha to self-awareness so that she can continue to do God’s work without experiencing burnout. God is

calling Martha to listen for the why and listen for the Word. For the Word informs our why...

We at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church want to love our neighbors as ourselves, that’s why we opened our shelter for 12 men and have our Open Table meal for more than a hundred guests. We call our children into worship and into the midst of this church community because Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”⁷ We gather in fellowship at Church Family Night and for the Annual Roof Garden Party or even in those moments of loss when we are mourning and experiencing pain – we gather in those moments, for it is said, “the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”⁸ We gather today to worship (even in this heat) for it is said, “for where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them.”⁹

The story of Martha and Mary tells us to find time spent in silence, listen at Jesus’ feet, thereby engaging ourselves and the Word that empowers, centers and sustains our own service. And so here, it’s not sister against sister. It’s not one woman placed over another woman. It’s about finding the balance of hearing and doing and taking care of one’s self while serving God and the people of this world. Even John Calvin points out when interpreting this text that Mary is not going to sit at Jesus’ feet forever! She’s will get up and go back to her ministry! Jesus may have pointed out that Mary picked the good service for that day by sitting and listening, but it’s not the whole service. Remember, at the beginning of the chapter, he sent people out in pairs to do God’s work and then after the parable of the Good Samaritan, he said to “Go and do likewise”.

I believe this passage and the passages leading up to it, show that we need both Marthas and Marys. And then we need to find the balance of both Martha and Mary within ourselves in order to live out a life of discipleship and feel whole along the way. Fred Craddock writes, “If we censor Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there

⁶ Gench, 80.

⁷ Matthew 19:14.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:35b – 26.

⁹ Matthew 18:20.

forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be, Yes.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 152.