

Luke 10:38-42
Martha and Mary: Finding Healthy Tension
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Now as they went on their way, Jesus^(a) entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things,⁴²but one thing is necessary.^(b) Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

Some of us easily relate to Mary, who loved to sit at Jesus' feet and listen. Others of us are more like Martha who loved to work for Jesus and let others do the talking. But Mary and Martha are sisters, and we don't understand either of them if we don't remember that they are related. Martha was the one who invited Jesus home for dinner, this encounter would never have taken place had it not been for Martha and her gift of hospitality. She was good at making people feel welcome, and cared for.

But while she's working in the kitchen Mary is out in the other room sitting and listening to Jesus talk. And that really irked Martha. We can imagine her in the kitchen banging the pots a little loudly than necessary, maybe she is remembering times from their childhood and adolescence where she helped while Mary was off reading or talking to Father. Mary is always out there listening, she is always engaging in conversation while I'm in here working, she never helps with the dishes, and doesn't seem to care that I do everything.

Mary got to study poetry or theology, while Martha had to study economics. Mary's probably going to expect Martha to support her when she goes to seminary. Finally, Martha bursts into the room and says "teacher do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me."

I don't think this is the first time this argument has taken place. And it reminds me of another argument that takes place in another family, the church.

Some of us are a lot like Mary, we could worship and learn and pray all day long because we love it. In it we behold the beauty and the mystery and the wonder of God. Music that moves us to tears. We're led by our hearts. A well written book will keep us up all night because the words are so beautiful. When a need arises, we are eager to support it. The Mary's among us are wired to behold, they behold beauty, they behold tragedy, they take it all in with such wonder.

What is Mary's Enneagram number?

But others in the church are wired like Martha, they're geared to volunteer. Someone's got to get the work done. If the Martha's are up all night it's because they have a project to do for which they expect to get an "A."

Mary is wired to behold and Martha is wired to be a worker, and the two of them argue back and forth in the church about who exactly has the gospel right.

Now we get the need to behold, otherwise you wouldn't have come to worship this morning. And I've been in church a long time, not as long as some of you...many of you. But you know and I know that without the Marthas the church would have faded away long ago. But they just get so ticked at the Marys, right?

Here's what it sounds like: Pastor, you're not going to just let them sit here in worship all the time are you? They need to get involved with something. They need to sign up for a mission project, or at least join the church so they can begin tithing. There is all this stuff to do and they don't do any of it. They're just takers.

Martha has a point. Mary has a point. But they're missing the point of one another, they're sisters.

There is a Mary or a Martha living inside of you. Now one of them is more dominant than the other. Now to behold you have to attend to the other voice. To discover and live into your identity in Christ you must constantly deal with your inner twin, even though you're not actually wired to do so.

Jesus decides to enter this family argument—which is very interesting that he enters into other people's arguments, he has his own arguments—he enters this one because there is something important going on here that he wants us to get. He starts out by saying Martha, Martha. I love that. Remember when your parents would say your name twice? Martha Martha. Now if they say your full name, Jonathan Paul Cornell get in here, you know that you're in trouble. But if they just say your first name twice, Jonathan Jonathan, it just means you're confused.

Martha Martha, you're distracted with many things. Only one thing is necessary, and Mary has chosen the better part, that which she will never lose. Notice he doesn't say Mary is the better part, he says Mary has chosen the better part.

Usually when this passage gets preached, the preacher uses it to uphold the virtues of Mary, and then proceeds to engage in a lot of Martha bashing. But Jesus is not trying to judge Martha or her work ethic. In the passage right before this one, the parable we heard last week, the Good Samaritan where the Priest and Levite walked past the wounded man on their way to worship, but the Samaritan stopped and engaged in a lot of work to care for this wounded man. And it's the worker who is praised in that passage and the Priest and Levite are judged.

So, the last thing Jesus wants to do is judge Martha's commitment to hard work and service. We need Martha's for the mission of the church. The cause of justice, binding up the wounded, the lost, the broken hearted, and the vulnerable, which reveals a major facet of the kingdom of God on earth depends implicitly on the Marthas. But also on the Marys, we have to behold in order to know why we're working.

Preacher Thomas Long tells a story about Grace Thomas. Grace was born in the early twentieth century as the second of five children. Her father was a streetcar conductor in Birmingham, Alabama, and so Grace grew up in modest circumstances. Later in life after getting married and moving to Georgia, Grace took a clerking job in the state capitol in Atlanta, where she developed a fondness for politics and the law. So, although already a full-time mother and a full-time clerk, Grace enrolled in night school to study law.

In 1954 Grace shocked her family by announcing that she wanted to run for public office. What's more, Grace didn't want to run for drain commissioner or for the city council: Grace ran for governor of the state of Georgia. There was a total of nine candidates that year—nine candidates, one issue. It was 1954 and the issue was *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark decision that mandated a desegregating of schools. Grace Thomas was alone among the nine candidates to say she thought this was a just decision. Her campaign slogan was “Say Grace at the Polls”! Hardly anyone did, though, and Grace ran dead last.

Her family was glad she got it out of her system, except she didn't and so decided to run for governor again in 1962. By then the racial tensions in the South were far more taut than they had been eight years earlier. Grace's progressive platform on race issues earned her a number of death threats. One day she held a rally in a small Georgia town and chose as her venue the old slave market in the town square. As she stood there, Grace motioned to the platform where once human beings had been bought and sold like a product and she said, “The old has passed away, the new has come. A new day has come when all Georgians, white and black, can join hands and work together.” At that point a red-faced man in the crowd interrupted Grace's speech to blurt out, “Are you a communist!?” “Why, no,” Grace replied quietly. “Well then, where'd you get all them galdurned ideas!?” Grace pointed to the steeple of a nearby Baptist church. “I learned them over there, in Sunday school.”

Grace had spent time listening to the Word of her Lord. What she heard changed her life and launched her on a very specific mission in life. It's always good to take time to listen to the Word of the Lord. But that Word is dangerous—it always leads to also action!

Jesus concern is for those who have committed themselves to being of service, that they attend to the souls yearning for the one who we serve. The call is to behold beauty and truth and grace in worship and learning, and then to get to work fulfilling the dreams we have while worshipping and learning. But if you worship your work for Jesus, you are going to lose Jesus, who is always the better part.