

## Setting Priorities

Luke 10:38-42

*16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/22<sup>nd</sup> July 2007*

Mary or Martha? Are you the Martha-type or the Mary-type? With whom do you identify the most? That's usually how this text is approached. Either-or. Two types; two styles; two different sets of priorities. Should we be like Mary, whom Jesus said "has chosen the better part"? Or, should we be like dutiful Martha, complaining that someone else isn't carrying her load around the household?

Now, I want to try something here, first. I would like to dissect how a text is *heard*. When we hear Jesus praising Mary for being "better," or whenever the "should" question is involved, my guess is that the moralizing part of our ear hones right in on those words. That's what gets our attention. *And that's what I want to disarm or disengage*. By moralizing, I mean the part of our egos, the part of ourselves that is always anxious about getting it right, being perfect, doing the right thing, the over-achiever. It's the part of us that gravitates toward whatever gets the approval of those we respect or have authority over us – and this isn't always a good thing.

We all have a moralizing ear that wants to know and do whatever it takes for us to be good or better, and we tend to model our lives after that ideal, whatever it might be. For example, we hear Jesus praising Mary; therefore, there's a part of us that immediately thinks, well then *we* need to be like Mary. Mary was obviously better than Martha. So we should try to be like her. Do you see what has happened here? Very quickly, this text is reduced to little more than morality and ethics, a text only about behavior. For many, this is a general (false) assumption, that the Bible has value for us only because it teaches us how to behave. We end up thinking we ought to be like Mary. There's more than morality going on here. Do we ever stop to ask, who is Mary? What did she do? And, why was she preferred?

This exchange is remarkably sparse in details, yet in just a few verses something dramatic takes place. Luke intentionally places this story right after the Parable of the Good Samaritan, "Go and do likewise;" show mercy to your neighbor. Be hospitable to strangers. Jesus and his disciples are on their way – where? We don't know. But they enter a village – which one? We don't know. There's a woman named Martha who lives there. But, who is Martha? We don't know. Were they friends? Was Martha's family part of the Jesus Movement in the Galilee? Or did her household just hear about him and when he arrived, she was the first to be hospitable. Was Martha married? Maybe. Probably. Was Mary? We don't know. Who was Mary? Other than being Martha's sister, we have no idea.

What we do know is that Jesus is welcomed into their home. In their home, he engages in conversation with Mary at his feet. Was she washing his feet? Perhaps. We don't know. What we do know is that Martha was distracted by many tasks. What was she doing? Was she straightening up the house for their guest? My guess is she was preparing a meal, given the importance of Middle Eastern hospitality. When you have a guest in your home, you offer a meal. Not a cup of tea and a cookie but a meal. Not a meal you pull out of the freezer and pop in the microwave requiring little effort. We're talking a real meal that requires thoughtful preparation, time, and expense. This was no ordinary guest, no vagabond in this midst who needed only some soup and bread. Martha knows who Jesus is; in fact she calls him, Lord. *Lord*. She knows he's from God; this is *God* in her midst. This is a guest worthy of such a feast. How can it not be?

How would you feel if you were putting together a dinner party for this kind of honored guest at the spare of the moment? Maybe just a little on edge? What if everything isn't just right? Word will spread. All the neighbors – that is, the whole village – probably know who's in her home, sitting at her table. Her reputation is on the line. She has much to lose. So we can have some sympathy for Martha's frustration when she directs her anger at *Mary at him* and says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me." Please, I can't do this all by myself!

And sympathy is what Jesus offers. Did you notice he doesn't scold Martha? He doesn't embarrass her. Did you also notice how familiar Martha could be with the Lord, using such a tone, telling the *Lord* what to do? I think they know one another. But can you imagine that kind of familiarity with the Lord of creation in your home? He appreciates all that she's doing for him. She's doing her duty. She's giving her best. She's following the rules of hospitality. I think Jesus has no doubt that he's going to have a very fine meal.

However, I also can imagine Martha frantic, irritated, frustrated, maybe at the point of tears. She's trying to get everything right; for everything to be just perfect. Yet, I can imagine right after her explosive remarks, just at the point of her meltdown, Jesus diffuses her fury, takes both of her arms, disarms her panic, looks straight into her eyes and says, "Martha, Martha." Calm down Martha, "you are worried and distracted by many things: there is need of only one thing." *There is only one thing you need. I'm so grateful for your welcome, for your hospitality, for your generosity, for the choices you have made in seeing to my every comfort, the choices you have made to the menu. But there is only need in all the universe of one thing – and Mary knows it; she has chosen the better part.*

But how? She's just sitting there on her lazy bum, *talking*, when Martha is doing all this work.

Yes, *talking*. This isn't small talk. This isn't idle chit chat or the latest gossip. This isn't just any conversation. Mary sat at the Lord's feet "and listened to what he was saying." In a humbling position of service, she listens. The Greek here is singular. What Jesus was saying is in the singular – TON LOGON: *the word*. Mary was listening, not to words, but *word*. Word, with a capital "W."<sup>1</sup> Word, as in Word of God. Divine Word. God-speech. This is *theos-logos*, theology, God words. This is the holy, creative Word that created the universe and called us into existence, which took on flesh and dwelt among us fully of grace and truth, the Word that continues to bring new worlds and new beings into being. This is the language of God pouring from Jesus' lips. TON LOGON. *This* is the choice she made and why it was and always is the better part. She could appreciate and value and listen with awe, with rapt attention to the Lord – *the Lord* – in her midst, talking with her, hearing things her ears had never heard before. This is why she made the better choice. Throw convention to the wind, forget about food, and rules of politeness, decorum, and stop worrying about what everyone else expects and being distracted by everything around you, that hinders you from making this kind of choice, of being receptive to the things Jesus is saying to you. There is need of only one thing. Mary prefers a theological conversation with the Lord over food!

The world needs Marthas. Some might say she is the practical one. The world needs Marys. Some might say she's the theoretical one, especially for those who think theological conversations are merely theoretical – *and they're not!* (Can you tell I'm being just a little defensive here?) The world will always have Marthas – and need Marthas because they allow the conversation to take place, to get done what needs to be done. But knowing what needs to get done and when and how are all dependent upon knowing what really matters. That's why, maybe, the world needs more Marys. Albert Einstein (1879-1955) once said there's nothing more practical than a good theory. Our theories, or our theologies, allow us to act. This is the Presbyterian way and why we place such a high premium on theology: because our theology shapes us. When we get our theology right, we'll get our actions right too. Choosing for what matters most sets the tone for what needs to get done.

What Jesus wants Martha and Mary to see, the Martha or Mary (and I wish there was a masculine equivalent, maybe Mike and Mitch), in all of us, is that *what really matters most is what Mary chose to pursue first, and that was being receptive to the Word of God*. By Word of God, we don't mean the Bible. The Bible as we know it didn't even exist then. I'm talking about *theos-logos*, theology. Not a dry, abstract academic discipline, but real *theology*, life-breathing theology, or theology that breathes life into

---

<sup>1</sup>Textual commentary from the Center for Excellence in Preaching website: <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewContent.php?iID=105&sID=1> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> July 2007).

God's people and into the church and into the world, the creative Divine Word that is forming and reforming us. That's what Jesus gives us: God's language, a holy conversation, a vocabulary to talk about love and forgiveness and grace and peace and justice and a way for these words to become flesh in us.

What matters most – the better part – is being receptive to what Jesus has to say to us, now – in our hearts, through scripture, sermon, through worship, through the people of God's community. It means being hospitable to the Spirit of God and listening to what we need to hear and know and discover. And this inevitably requires *choice* on our part.

That's why this is a difficult text for us to hear, because we know all-too-well the things we worry about and the things which distract our attentions and prevent us from doing not only what we know is right, but the very things our hearts and our souls really need. By right or better, of course, we mean the choices that will put listening to God a priority in our lives, "that one thing."

There's so much pulling us away from the things that really matter. You know what they are. There are so many things and activities competing for our time that it's difficult making our commitment to God a priority, making time to be receptive to God, putting God as the one priority above all others, instead of one among many. Time and again, I've found that when God is my priority (and believe me, I'm not always consistent in this), when I remember what is really most important in life, every other so-called priority, worry, or task all seem to fall away from the center to find their *proper* place in my life. We have to choose, not what is easy, or convenient, or what meets my need, over what is right and better and ultimately more real. This is something Harry Potter had to learn time and again. This is true for children but also for the Harry Potter who exists in every adult.<sup>2</sup>

Where are we choosing for the *opposite* of the better part in our lives? That is, where are choosing for what takes us away from God. Where is God on our list of priorities? Where is worship? Prayer? Service? Commitment to this faith community, to one another? How can we make better choices?

Are you Mary or Martha? Martha's way, while necessary and needed, is the way of convention, and maybe easier. Mary's way bucks the trend. Mary's way is really the

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "Dumbledore's advice: choose what is right over what is easy." John Granger, *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter: Understanding the Meaning, Genius, and Popularity of Joanne Rowling's Harry Potter Novels* (Zossima Press, 2002).

more difficult way. It's really the road not taken, putting perhaps a new twist on Robert Frost's (1874-1963) poem:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.*

...

And you know the rest:

*Two roads diverged in the wood, and I  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>3</sup>*

*Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs*

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church  
Catonsville, Maryland*

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," from *Mountain Interval* (1916).