

Lord, Don't You Care?
A Sermon by
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New Testament Lesson: Luke 10:38-42

NRSV

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.

The Sermon

In learning about Jesus through the accounts in each of the four Gospels, we come to realize that those who encountered him did not always leave those encounters feeling warm and fuzzy.

Depending upon their motivations or how they were intending to use this wandering rabbi, some certainly left healed, or affirmed, while others left with their faces aglow with shame, embarrassment, and likely more than a little anger. My sense is that Jesus' guiding motivation, a motivation clearly in the prophetic tradition of Israel, was to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

As a consequence, in both last Sunday's gospel lesson from Luke on the story of the Good Samaritan, and in this week's lesson regarding Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary, the comfortable are, indeed, sorely afflicted – in one case the comfort of a Torah-trained lawyer debating Scripture – and in the other the comfort of a hostess entertaining a prominent guest in her own home.

So, both the Torah scholar and the female homeowner feel the sting of Jesus' unexpected responses, but seemingly for exactly opposite reasons.

Given the stark contrasts between these two brief but powerful stories, and their back-to-back placement in Luke's Gospel, New Testament scholars are convinced that one should never read the story of the Good Samaritan without taking into account the immediately following story of Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary. They go together.

Last week we read about Jesus' encounter with a man skilled in Scripture who has trouble hearing the word of God, and Jesus offers him an example of a Samaritan. Now Jesus visits with a woman so busy serving she does not hear the word, and Jesus offers her an example, her sister. To the man, Jesus said "Go and do"; to the woman, Jesus said "Sit down, listen, and learn."

We need both the example of the Samaritan and of Mary, if we are to fulfill the command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all

your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27).

Mary models the love of God by placing her body at Jesus' feet, and attending with all her heart, soul, and mind to Jesus' teachings.

The Samaritan modeled the reality of loving your neighbor as well as you love yourself, by giving himself, his possessions, and his financial resources, on behalf of the tragically wounded man.

That the stories of the Samaritan and the two sisters belong together is even highlighted by the way both are introduced. The English translation has muted this way of introducing these stories, but in the Greek in verse 30, the translation is "a certain man," while in verse 38 Martha is introduced as "a certain woman."

We should also not miss the fact that in each of the stories there is a radical departure from contemporary societal norms. In the first story, no one would expect it to be a Samaritan who would wind up as the example of the "neighbor", and the model of true discipleship by not only seeing the man in desperate need, but in doing something about that need. Samaritans were hated by Jews, living on the margins of the Jewish world, mostly invisible if seen at all.

Yet Jesus places the Samaritan at the heart of his story.

In the second story, no one would expect Mary to wind up as the example of true discipleship. Martha was the head of this little household -- at least in Luke's telling. In John's Gospel Mary and Martha have a brother, Lazarus, but Lazarus doesn't seem to be part of Luke's tradition.

It is Martha who greets Jesus. It is Martha who busies herself preparing a meal. Martha is showing the expected hospitality in a Jewish household. Look for example at the story of Jesus' healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law. The evidence of her healing was that she got up and prepared a meal.

As for Mary, she is not only violating social expectation by failing to assist her sister with meal preparations, she is actually bringing disgrace -- shame -- on her house by behaving as though she were a male.

To sit at the feet of a rabbi was to assume the posture of a disciple, and in that culture only males could be disciples. No wonder Martha could expect Jesus to take her side.

Listen for example to this ancient Jewish rabbinical advice about worship and women:

"Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst... [but] talk not much with womankind."¹

¹ See Herbert Danby, ed. And trans., *The Mishnah* (Oxford University Press, 1933) 446.

We can't say for sure whether Martha was simply angry that her sister wasn't helping her, or felt the shame of Mary acting like a man by assuming the posture of a disciple, but we can for sure say this – Martha knows how to triangulate a relationship.

You likely know about triangles. Kathy and I learned about them in spades given that our daughter was an only child, so while she was growing up we had this little triangle going on quite often.

In a relationship triangle person A (in this story Martha), is feeling tension and anger toward person B (Mary), but rather than directly confronting Mary, she tries to hook in person C (Jesus), and get him to do the dirty work of confronting Mary.

Not only that, Martha expresses displeasure that someone so wise as Jesus didn't see for himself that Mary was out of line and send her off to the kitchen, so Martha wouldn't have to not only do the meal preparation but assume responsibility to see that everyone behaved as grownups should behave in a proper Jewish home.

Sound familiar in non-Jewish homes as well?

However Jesus, who as he did in the story of the Samaritan proves himself to be a master of avoiding the triangle. Mind you, he doesn't scold Martha for fulfilling her hostess duties, but he does observe that she has a hard time just sitting and listening.

Poor Martha.

Without the story of the Good Samaritan as a counter point, one could get the impression that hearing the Word takes precedence over doing what the Word demands.

Taken together, however, we learn that true disciples – even ones who may have no clue that is what they are being – act when necessary, and also listen when necessary. Emphasize one over the other and you are unbalanced in following God's will and Jesus' example and teaching.

But Jesus' discipleship views were definitely not traditional. Anyone who hears the word of God, and then does it, can be a disciple -- Samaritans, women, tax collectors, those considered unclean prior to their healing encounters with Jesus. Thus we need to be careful when we seek to use "biblical values" to reinforce some of our contemporary social mores as to who is, or who is not, acceptable in God's sight. We might be the ones walking away with red faces.

Jesus isn't the first to introduce radical discipleship into Jewish religious history. From the first chapters of the Bible onward, we find that God chooses the most surprising people to carry out God's will, and to model God's way. We should also remember, that to be called by God can be a very frightening thing, for we can be certain we will offend many, if not most, of our contemporaries when we tell them we've heard the Word of the Lord, and that the Lord is not happy with their

behavior, their attitude, their assumptions about who is -- and who is not -- acceptable in the kingdom.

Martha gets a bad rap in this little story. She is merely doing what any good Jewish woman of her day would have been doing. Thus it is understandable that she would be peeved that her sister is not lifting a finger to help her.

Why she enlisted Jesus' help in casting shame on her sister is not clear, but Martha is doing nothing wrong. Throughout the Bible, providing hospitality and knocking oneself out to prepare a meal is highly valued. Note that the disciples on the road to Emmaus had the true identity of their traveling companion revealed when they provided him with hospitality and prepared a meal.

So the issue here about Martha is not her role as a host. The issue is her distraction, her anxiety. She was so busy serving, she never took the time to listen to her Lord.

Martha also modeled behavior that is the opposite of how one should behave toward God's Christ.

Martha "stands over" Jesus, in contrast to her sister who is sitting "beside" Jesus, "at his feet."

There is a sense that Martha is opposing what Jesus and Mary are doing. One might say that in Martha's view Mary should be doing something else, and Jesus should know and tell Mary to do something else – namely help Martha to be a good hostess – and carry out the proper female duties.

We certainly know of many denominations and congregations even today where the distinctions between what it is appropriate for a woman to do in a worship setting are very different from what it is appropriate for a male to do, so this story is not just about the unenlightened past.

Further, Mary was "listening" to Jesus, letting him tell her what to do or be, while Martha "speaks to Jesus," telling him what his role should be.

We probably all know people like Martha. We may be Marthas ourselves, whether female or male. We are so busy doing the work of the church that we never have time to listen to the Word of the church.

True discipleship involves both listening and doing.

May God give us the grace and wisdom to be both hearers and doers of God's Word.

Thanks be to God.