

Sermon: Go “Mary” or Go Home?

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Scripture: Col. 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Trying to make friends when you live far from where you grew up can be difficult. When I lived in Germany, the boys were tiny, tiny boys, and I remember hosting a number of dinners trying to build community. In this endeavor, I took the role of hostess, modeling it after the women I watched while I was growing up. I was never a little girl who was especially interested in the girly things. I didn't learn to sew or cook much outside of home economics class. I could bake a few things, but only learned to really cook after moving to Germany and finding that I had to get this right or my family would starve. Once I got the basics down and started having folks over for meals, I modeled what I remembered seeing, but had never practiced growing up. I quickly learned that having people over for dinner was exhausting and that the hostess never sat down. The visiting part of these visits was never really mine to enjoy. I was always hustling and bustling about, only sitting to eat, and even then, if there was something needed on the table that wasn't there, guess who was the first to get up?

But even though these visits were exhausting, I kept inviting people around. I knew that it was important for me to have community and, being far from “home,” I wouldn't have that if I didn't participate in the building of it. Along the way, I think I did find that community. Many of the on and off-base neighbors I found in my two years overseas are still friends of mine to this day. Community matters and neighbors are neighbors, even if we live in very different places around the world.

Last week, we talked about the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story Jesus tells to illustrate several things about what it means to love our neighbor. He addresses who our neighbor is—which isn't just the buddy who lives next door, but also the enemy whom we pass on the street or is from territory that isn't our own. By telling this particular story, Jesus emphasizes among other things what love looks like, and it isn't a sentimental thing—it's not a noun. For Jesus: love is a verb. It requires us to *do* for our neighbors. Not loving as emotion, but loving others by finding ways to meet them and their needs as they are.

In today's story, Jesus has left behind the authorities who would put him to the test, for now at least, and is, instead, visiting the home of a woman called Martha. On his arrival, Jesus is welcomed with open arms. Martha, the text tells us, has a sister called Mary, who is also present at Jesus's visit. While they may come from the same family, Mary and Martha are two very different people and, unsurprisingly, they have two very different approaches to this situation, if not life itself. If you have a sibling, surely you can understand just how different brothers and sisters can be from one another. I look at my two munchkins and, I can tell you, they are as different as night and day. And no one who knows my brother would think, based on our personalities, that we are related, and yet, for better and worse, we are.

But I digress. Suffice to say that in the presence of Jesus, Martha and Mary behave very differently. As was common for women in Jesus's time, Martha is milling around, taking care of the logistics while her guests visit. She's thinking of dinner: digging out recipes, putting pots on the stove, chopping up veggies, and setting the table for a meal. Martha is filling the role that many women today still find themselves in, being the perfect hostess—and she doing it all alone. Her actions are of the perfect host, they are actions that define hospitality, at least at first.

Mary, on the other hand, does something rather peculiar for a woman in that day and age: she sits at Jesus's feet as a male disciple might, listening and learning from him as he pays this visit to her family home. Mary behaves untraditionally, perhaps, it's true, but her behavior is consistent with many of Jesus's disciples, both male and female, who are captivated by his presence and message. Mary fulfills the role of a disciple. Martha fulfills the role of a woman of the house.

The stark contrast is easy to imagine even though Luke's gospel uses so few words to tell the story. We get a very clear image of Martha, furiously working and Mary, patiently listening. It's important to note here that neither one of them inherently does anything wrong, really. It may be argued, as Martha will indeed do, that Mary's actions are uncharacteristic and even inhospitable based on the cultural and religious norms of the day. Yet we also know Jesus has a track record of turning those norms on their head.

Knowing this ought to give us some clue as to how Jesus feels about Mary's stillness in this moment.

But to polarize Martha and Mary in this text, pitting one's actions against the other, would be a misreading of this text. As would be, perhaps, our tendency to make these actions in this instant a summation of how our religious life ought to be. We should not assume from this one story that Mary's quiet, contemplative kind of devotion to Jesus is somehow better than is Martha's is. The text does not tell us that. And even though we know that Mary and Martha are women and that women would be fulfilling certain types of roles in each situation, to center our understanding of the text on gender is to center it in the wrong place. To be sure, Jesus's action and words seem to be affirming of female discipleship, as he does not tell Mary she is doing wrong or to get up and help Martha. But even this part isn't the point of this particular moment in Jesus's ministry.

I have heard sermons that focused in on all of these points, yet as I prepared this time, it occurred to me that this isn't really the point Jesus is making. Yes, Martha's actions are in keeping with the long tradition, going back to the time of Abraham and Sarah, of hospitality. But that's not inherently good or bad. What's troubling, yet, if I'm honest, all too relatable, is Martha's attitude. Here she is feverishly working to get dinner on that table and getting more and more agitated as she tries to balance all these things while seeing her sister sit there at Jesus's feet doing nothing. I imagine her placing the plates on the table with a little too much force, banging around in the kitchen, hurriedly coming in and out of the dining room huffing and puffing just waiting for Jesus to say, "Mary, why don't you get up and help your sister! Can't you see how hard she is working?" Given what Martha does next, you can bet there's nothing subtle about her behavior.

Because when Jesus doesn't pay any attention to Martha's zealous industriousness, Martha expresses her exasperation verbally. "Lord," she angrily states, "don't you care that my lazy sister has left me to do ALL of this work ALL BY MYSELF? Tell her to help me." I imagine Jesus chuckling a little internally, looking down and shaking his head a bit as he prepares to respond. While he may not have appeared to register her grievances by her behavior, Martha's feverish busyness did not go unnoticed by Jesus, and we can tell that by his response. "Martha," he says, "dear Martha, you are worried

and distracted by many things. You're running about worrying about the wrong things in this moment. Right now, the emphasis should be on one thing." Think about this... it's not her actions that he addresses here and how could he? She's doing exactly as is expected. It's her preoccupation he's speaking to, not her hospitality. It's worry and distraction that are the problems in this story, not what she's distracted by.

Martha has worked herself into a lather not over the act of hospitality, but over her sister's behavior. She is consumed with frustration not just over her sister, but over her guest's lack of response. Her focus is misplaced, Jesus says, all this worry and distraction is missing the point. But that's not to say that Jesus is saying Mary's choice of sitting at his feet is better than Martha's choice of being an active hostess. He's not focused on her action at all, but on her worry and distraction. Because of Mary's focus on Jesus, he says that Mary has chosen the "better part." Theologian John Shea offers however, that the NRSV translation, as well as many other English translations, use the word "better," when the Greek word used here would more accurately be translated as "good." Mary has chosen the "good part." In saying that Mary has chosen the "good" part, Jesus is saying that Mary has chosen "the connection to God who is good, the ground and energy of effective action." Shea's point is that this is a both/and message and not an either/or one. God is not just a God of the outward behaviors, but also of inward peace. God doesn't just call us to service, but sustains us throughout it by being the ground of all we are and all we do. The ground, in the words of Paul Tillich, of being.

Recently, Donna and I visited with a friend of mine who I don't get to sit down and visit with often. We're both ministers and always very busy. We had planned to make dinner for him, but he ended up not having that much time on his hands, so we decided to just sit and chat, instead, for whatever time he had. After he left, I remember thinking how nice it was to sit and actually visit with him. I remember our conversation and I think Donna, who doesn't know him very well, got a better picture of who he was by taking the time to sit with us than she would have if we had busied ourselves with the perfect hostess's dinner preparations. I think, had we been prepping food, we would have been so distracted that neither we, nor he, would have come away from the visit with as much appreciation for the time we had. The deepening of our friendship— the connection we

were making during conversation, the ongoing work of love that is relationship building—would not have been possible if the distracted, hurried kind of hospitality had been our focus.

In ministry, we often worry about the busy-ness of doing church. We worry we don't have enough programs to offer, that we aren't doing enough to make church more than it is. We worry over the minutia of worship or little and big things about the building. We fret over finances and hurry through our meetings so that we can touch on every little bit of what is or isn't happening. Some of those things are necessary some of the time, but they aren't the point of church. We can keep ourselves busy checking off boxes and forget that the real work of the church is about relationship. Mary's stillness in this moment and connection with God is good. Martha's hospitality is fine and important, but it isn't more important than what Mary is doing. Her worry and distraction is making what she's doing problematic. There's no grace and love in her actions anymore, there's only duty and apprehension.

In many ways, we as the church are "worried and distracted by many things" rather than focused on the good part, where we connect not just at the feet of God, the source of our being that brings us peace, but also with one another. Jesus isn't saying, to paraphrase the popular American Authors song from a few years ago, "Go Mary or Go Home," he's saying turn your focus to God and let that be the ground of all you do. As we discussed on Trinity Sunday not all that long ago, ours is a relational God who placed us in community to be in relationship not just with God, but with others. Amidst all of our worried, distracted Marthaing, let us also remember to be Mary, too. Let us remember not just the busyness and distractions of church, but the good part, too. Let us be drawn back to relationship with the ground of our being and remember with whom we are so very blessed to share that ground. Amen.