

July 21, 2019 • Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

## “Alternatives in an Either/Or World”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

The story we hear this morning from Luke's Gospel puts us on a road trip with Jesus and his disciples and followers. Just to be clear—it's not a vacation that they're on. They're traveling through Samaria south to Jerusalem. Jesus has “set his face to go to Jerusalem” where we know he will meet with desertion and death.

As Luke's next ten chapters unfold, we'll see that along the way, Jesus is showing and teaching his disciples about his mission, his purpose, his vision of the Kingdom of God. And as always, things happen in ways that catch us up short, cause us to re-think, and push us to consider our own ways, our own goals, our own priorities.

Often we find ourselves shaking our heads and pondering... maybe it's not as simple or obvious as we think. This is the Holy Spirit working in us, so that, as Larry Young reminded our scholarship recipients a few weeks ago in the words of Paul: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

The story of sisters Mary and Martha is one of those moments. Just five verses in Luke's Gospel. Their story is told very differently in the Gospel of John, but let's hold that for a moment and come back to how Luke frames it. “Now as they went on their way,” he writes, “he (Jesus) entered a certain village (Bethany), where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.”

Ok, we might think. We get it. This is going to be another of Jesus' stories about hospitality, and it is that, in part. And rather extravagant hospitality it turns out to be. Jesus is not just inviting himself to dinner, which surely would have been rather intimidating in and of itself. Even more than years ago when David's dear Uncle Otto, Lutheran pastor, would fly in from out of town, unbeknownst to us, call about 4 in the afternoon to say that he'd be over for dinner around 6 and would also love to spend the night. “Of course,” we'd say. “Love to have you!” And then scramble around madly to get to the grocery store, vacuum, and get the guest room made up. “Distracted by many things” could well have been said of us on those occasions. Until we'd finally all sit down around the dinner table and talk for hours about family, and life, and the church. We cherish every moment of those visits.

But this Mary and Martha story is something like that on steroids. It's not just Uncle Otto ringing the doorbell—it's *Jesus!* And he's brought along 70 of his closest friends. “Hi, Martha, we're here for dinner.” No wonder Martha's scrambling to pull this off. Food, water, ointment for the travelers' tired feet. But the text reveals that her hospitality is her service. The Greek word used in this passage for all the stuff she's trying to get done is *diakonia*, the root of our word for “deacon.” In this story, Martha's ministry is to provide extravagant hospitality and to serve.

While this is going on, her sister Mary is serving in her own way. She is eager to listen for the Word of God, perhaps having in her heart the ancient question: “Is there any word from the Lord?” In quietness, might she hear the still, small voice of God?

Both sisters, you see, realizing something special about Jesus. Both eager to love and serve him, in their different ways. Both modeling faithful discipleship.

But that's not really how this scene is presented is it? The tension in that house must have been thick enough to cut with a knife. The sisters are not into a comfortable yin and yang embrace of their dichotomy. As Luke tells it, Martha won't go to her sister directly with her frustration, but instead says to Jesus—wanting to triangulate him into this conflict—“my sister has left me to do all the work by myself...don't you care?”

(Parents—doesn't this sound like how quarreling siblings often would rather that you adjudicate their grievances?)

Jesus demurs and will not put himself in the middle. But his response is at first troubling for those of us who might want to rush to Martha's defense. “Martha... there is need of only one thing... Mary has chosen the better part, —or ‘a good part’ as some translations put it—which will not be taken away from her.”

Oh my. Biblical scholars and the church have parsed this and argued over it probably since it was first written. What is Jesus saying? What are we to make of this?

The story seems to be set up to appeal to the worst of human nature, that is to stereotype these two sisters and then pit one against the other. Who's right—Mary or Martha? Who's better—Mary or Martha? Who is the true disciple—Mary or Martha? What is more important—action or contemplation? Doing or studying? Faith or works?

Binary either/or thinking always gets the best of us, doesn't it? It short circuits our critical faculties and plunks us down in little boxes of our own making where you're either a this or a that, right or wrong, good or bad. Life is most often so much more nuanced and complicated, isn't it?

Biblical scholars are doing some very interesting work on these days, examining, for example some of the binary expressions in the creation story itself. We know it well—heaven/earth, darkness/light, night/day, male/female, land/waters...Some scholars argue that these are not meant as doublets—that is a pair of two similar, identical or opposite things—but rather as a spectrum. “Every pairing is a spectrum, in which a variety of expressions occur.”

When we think about it for a moment, is this not our experience? Take darkness/light or night/day. Now, add sunrise, dawn, noonday, sunset, moonrise, the first twinkling of the stars, the Milky Way visible only in the very darkest sky...Or take land/waters. Now add estuaries and coastlands, shorelines, and river deltas...We see a spectrum of realities and possibilities.

So back to our two faithful sisters, Martha and Mary. Two who loved Jesus and sought to serve him in different ways. When Jesus said: ‘one thing is needed or necessary’ what if he himself was pointing to a kind of oneness and unity? A unity that they, in their either/or mindsets, could not see? What if Jesus was saying something like “‘both’ are important to me and precious in my sight”? And service in the Kingdom of God needs who both sisters are. No longer conflicted opposites, they are both essential parts of the whole. Their story becomes a parable about the unity of hand and heart, of faith and works, of prayer and service.

Perhaps the writer of John’s Gospel caught a glimpse of this more holistic view. In his accounts of these two sisters, it is Mary who becomes the “doer,” the active one, anointing his feet with the precious oil. And it is Martha who after Jesus has raised their brother Lazarus from the dead, has this faith-filled exchange with Jesus. “Jesus said to her “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” [Martha] said to him “Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world”.’

The Kingdom of God invites us out of our boxes and stereotypes, out of an either/or world into a both/and new creation. God is as close as a whisper and beyond all things. The wolf dwells with the lamb, and the leopard lies down with the kid. Christ is both fully human and fully divine. In both our living and our dying, Christ is with us and we all belong to him, now and always. We are created for life in a beautiful spectrum of love that embraces all things, unites all things, hallows all things.

Even now God is doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?

Thanks be to God who invites us into the fullness of life in all its wonder, majesty and mystery.