

9-2-18

Luke 10: 38-42

Melissa Maltman

Luke's story about the visit of Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha is almost guaranteed to stir up an argument. To begin with, there is already an argument going on in this story; and, over the years, there have been countless more arguments caused by this story.

Here is what happened to cause the argument in the story: As Luke tells it, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and one day he stops in a certain village where two sisters live--Mary and Martha. Martha takes the initiative, welcomes Jesus into her home, and begins preparing for him as fancy a meal as she can. There is nothing unusual about this--showing hospitality, welcoming guests, feeding them well--these were very important virtues in that culture, and Martha is doing her best to show hospitality to Jesus and to make him feel at home. But while she is busily working away on the food, her sister Mary does something unusual. Normally in the ancient world, all of the adult women would have shared in the responsibility for preparing

a meal, but Mary chooses not to help out. Instead she sits quietly at Jesus' feet, like a student or a disciple would, and listens intently to what Jesus is saying.

Well, finally Martha has had all of that she can stand, and here is where the argument starts. She is frankly tired of doing all the work while Mary sits, and she lets her feelings be known. Now, we might have expected her to hiss at Mary through clenched teeth, "Hey Sis, I could use a hand with this, you know." But she doesn't say anything at all to Mary. She instead softly reprimands Jesus and tries to get him to tell Mary to get to work. "Lord, don't you care?" she protests. "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

You might remember that some people used to wear bracelets marked WWJD-- What Would Jesus Do? When they faced difficult moral choices, they looked at the bracelet, and it reminded them to ask themselves "What would Jesus do in this situation?" But at this point in our story, the real question is not "What would Jesus do?" but "What should Jesus do?" I mean, there he is in the middle of an argument between sisters. Mary is sitting at his feet listening to him while an irritated Martha, wet bread dough on her hands, is politely telling him off--that he is uncaring and that if he has any sense of what is right, he'll order Mary to get up off the floor and get busy preparing the lamb and the rice. So what should Jesus do?

Should he defend himself? Should he reassure Martha that he does, in fact, care? Should he recognize that Martha has a good point? Or maybe he should pull a Jesus-like surprise and get up and prepare the meal himself and let Martha take a rest. Or should he play the role of peacemaker and say, "Now Martha...Mary, let's cool this off; we can work this out"? What should Jesus do?

What he does--and this is what has bothered a lot of people down through the years and set off all the arguments about this story--what Jesus does is to gently scold Martha right back and, then, apparently take Mary's side in the argument. "Martha, Martha," Jesus says, "you are worried and distracted by many things, but there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen it; Mary has chosen the better part."

Now, if we are going to understand what this story is saying to us today, we have to wrestle with this troublesome response by Jesus. Why does Jesus praise Mary over against hardworking, worn out Martha? Why does he say that Mary, who simply sits and listens, has chosen a better part than Martha, who is sweating away preparing a meal and trying to provide some hospitality?

Some people argue that what Jesus is doing is criticizing what we might call "busy work Christianity." They think that Martha is so preoccupied with her little, trivial chores, cooking all those dishes, that she has missed the deeper spiritual point. She is, they say, like so many religious people who spend all their time organizing the

next drive or the next big event or going to committee meetings --but who never actually take time to pray to God, or read the Bible, or praise him in song. In their view, Jesus says to Martha, "Stop being so busily religious and start being more spiritual, like Mary."

Well, I understand that point, and I do hear a lot of people today say things like, "You know I'm not into organized religion. I don't believe in institutional Christianity. That's just playing church. I'm spiritual, but not religious," but I don't believe that view holds any water either. The institutional church can be corrupt, that's true; but this doesn't take away from the fact that Christian faith is never an abstract, spiritualized thing. It always takes on solid, embodied active form. After all, God did not write a dreamy Valentine in the clouds, "Hello world. I love you." No, God's love came in the fleshly form of Jesus, who dwelled among us and got involved in the messy details of everyday life, who taught and healed and touched and ate and gathered and died and rose in bodily form. The incarnation means that the place to find God is not in otherworldly thoughts but in the earthy details of everyday life. Martha was not being hospitable in the abstract and her cooking that meal that day was not trivial; hospitality finally means that somebody has to boil the water and slice the onions.

What does it mean, for example, for a parent to love a child? It's more than just a feeling or a sentiment. Loving a child means teaching her how to tie her sneakers and gently wiping the dried blood away from the hurt place and going to her in the middle of the night when she has a nightmare and driving her to soccer practice and grilling the hot dog he has asked for and helping him with his math homework. Or again, I think about the Sunday school and Vacation Bible school teachers who arrive at the church early so that they can look over the **Bible story and** set out the bottles of glue and the scissors and the construction paper for the morning's class. I think about the woman who sees it as her ministry to plan the menu and cook the food for the next community meal for people who need a hot one or the man who spends his Saturdays hammering nails and installing sheetrock on the Habitat for Humanity House or another church project where he is moving earth, pouring cement, estimating the number of shingles needed. Busy work? I don't think so. It's the form that love and faith take. I cannot imagine Jesus saying to Christians who are emptying bed pans in an AIDS clinic or baking food for the soup kitchen, "You people are preoccupied with busy work. Leave the children, the needy, the ill, the lonely behind. Come sit and meditate for a while. Be spiritual but not religious. This is the better part."

Now some people would say that I'm just making this way too difficult. They point out that this Mary-Martha story comes in Luke immediately after the Parable of the

Good Samaritan, and they argue that Luke is just trying to make the point that we should love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. The Parable of the Good Samaritan shows us love of neighbor--that's what the Samaritan did for the man beaten by the robbers--and the story of Mary and Martha shows love of God--that's what Mary is doing sitting at Jesus' feet. Good Samaritan--love of neighbor. Mary and Martha--love of God. Simple. The problem with this is that you cannot so neatly separate the two: over here is the love of neighbor; over there is the love of God. In the Christian life, they're intertwined, mixed together; you can hardly tell where one ends and the other begins. We show our love of God by loving our neighbor, and the true love of neighbor grows out of our love of God. They're two sides of the same coin.

And that, I think, may get us close to the real heart of this Mary and Martha story. There is nothing wrong in and of itself with Martha's fixing the food. This is the way people show love and welcome and hospitality and care. There is nothing wrong, in fact there is something absolutely essential, about showing one's love of God and neighbor by baking the bread and washing the olives, by putting out those bottles of glue in Sunday School and nailing those boards for Habitat for Humanity and serving the food in the soup kitchen. Martha, preparing that meal of hospitality, is doing a good thing--a necessary thing--an act of service--but if we try to do this kind of service apart from the life-giving Word of the Good News of

Jesus Christ, apart from the vision that comes only from God, it will distract us and finally wear us down. Mary has chosen to listen to the Word. Jesus, the living Word, is present, right in her house, and if she is going to love God and love neighbor, if she is going to show hospitality to the stranger and care for the lost, then everything depends on hearing and trusting that word.

Years ago when I was studying to be a pastor I served as a chaplain at a hospital as part of my training. Our supervisor shared a story of an ecumenical group he had worked with a few years before who supervised chaplains. Their job was to meet, to listen to reports from the chaplains about their work, and to offer support and counsel. One year, they had heard the reports of the chaplains, and they were asking them questions. An older member of the council asked the chaplains, "What are the seminary students like morally these days?" The chaplains looked at each other, wondering how to answer that question. Finally one of them took a stab at it. "Well," she said, "I think you'd be basically pleased. The students are pretty ambitious in terms of their careers, but that's not all they are. A lot of them tutor kids after school. Some work in a night shelter and in a soup kitchen for the homeless" As she talked, the Jewish chaplain who was listening to her began to grin. The more she talked, the bigger he grinned, until finally it became distracting. "Am I saying something funny?" she said to the Jewish chaplain. "No, no, I'm sorry," he replied. "I was just sitting here thinking. You are saying that the

seminary students are good people, and you're right. And you're saying that they are involved in good social causes, and they are. But what I was thinking is that the one thing they lack is a vision of salvation." Everyone looked at the Jewish chaplain. "No, it's true," he said. "If you do not have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can't get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down."

If you don't have some vision of what God is doing, it finally beats you down. Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his Word, listens to that vision, and without that Word, we cannot go on, like Martha, preparing meals of hospitality for the world. It will finally worry us, distract us, anger us, exhaust us, and beat us down. With that Word, though, we can prepare meals for the hungry, care tenderly for the sick, show hospitality to the stranger and keep on loving and living in the name of Christ.

What did Mary hear at Jesus' feet? What is the Word we hear from Jesus? Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Peace be with you. Do not be afraid.

What we hear from Jesus is that our lives are gathered into God's life, that God is out there in the world healing and feeding and restoring and caring, and therefore

what we do for others counts, really counts, and we can trust God and hope for God's new creation.

Back when I was in college I went with a group on a mission trip to Jamaica. On our trip we spent a lot of time in one of the orphanages and in one of the local elementary schools. We spent some time trying to teach Bible camp songs in a classroom seriously overcrowded with children, most of them very poor, all of them need and wiggly and noisy. It was a difficult sometimes even chaotic, learning environment, but our church group marveled to see how the teacher carried herself with great calm and patience, treating all of the children with love and respect, despite the poverty and the chaos. We decided that the only way she could do this was that she must really love being a teacher. So we were surprised to hear her reply, "Oh, I don't come here every day mainly because I love teaching. I come here every day because I love Jesus, and I see Jesus in every one of these children."

I think that teacher had been like Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet. And because she had, she could get up like Martha and teach those children with joy and hope, seeing Jesus in the face of every one of them.

Let us pray. You have taught us, O God, that the way to life is to love you with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But we are often so overwhelmed

by the swirling demands of life that we cannot truly do either one. But then, in your mercy, there is Jesus, come to visit in our home, come to speak to us in the middle of life. Let us, like Mary, sit at his feet and listen to his Word that gives life. Then, having heard that Word, let us, like Martha, get up to serve others in Jesus' name. Amen.