

July 21, 2019  
Luke 10:38-42  
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We've heard this story before, right? Mary's good because she sits at Jesus' feet; Martha's bad because she's so busy. This is about action vs. contemplation. And all of us who are super busy caring for kids or aging parents, or who are really active in volunteer work serving others, can feel moderately guilty for the next 10 minutes as we listen to the sermon for neglecting to carve out a quiet time for daily devotions, and that will be that. Right?

Now, it may be true that some of us would benefit from some quiet time of reflection and prayer in our day. But if all we take away from this text is that those who already have a crazy amount of demands on their life should feel chastised by Jesus because there's something else they didn't fit into the schedule today—and to be honest, I've heard a lot of sermons and Sunday school lessons on this story that I've walked away from with this impression—then we have missed the point entirely.

First, we've got to take a look at this story in its context. We have this remarkable ability to pluck these bible stories out and read them in isolation. But this is a really important one not to disconnect from what happens right before it. And what happens right before this story is Jesus telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Which, in case you hadn't noticed, is all about active love for the neighbor. It's all about showing mercy in a real, tangible way. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says.

And then the very next thing that happens is Jesus shows up at Martha's house and she lives this out. She is embodying this parable as she chops the onions and makes sure everyone's water glasses are refilled. Martha gets it. She understands that our faith is never an abstract, disembodied, purely spiritual thing. It always takes on solid, embodied, active form.

That's the whole point of the incarnation. God wasn't just going to say, "Oh, I love you guys so much." God's love came to us in flesh and dirt and bread and wine, as Jesus taught and healed and touched and ate and gathered and died and rose in bodily form. God's love is present in the earthy details, in the acts of service, in the concrete acts of welcome to the stranger. And Martha's love is present as she extends that same hospitality and welcome to Jesus.

So for us to conclude that Jesus thinks those who live out their faith by volunteering at a homeless shelter or serving a funeral lunch or visiting with a lonely church member or cleaning up, for the thousandth time, the mess made by a young child is somehow inferior to those who spend a lot of time at Bible study—well, that just makes no sense at all.

And the reverse is also true. Those of us who, for whatever reason, can't do the active service things—those whose bodies are frail, those who have way more time than they want to spend "contemplating," because that's all their days are—those beloved folks are often made to feel inferior. If we can't put our faith in action, if we can't go out and do all the things, we are all too often given the message that we are not true disciples—and that, likewise, makes no sense at all.

At the end of the day, I think we know that action and contemplation go together, hand in hand. It's not a matter of pitting one against the other. We need both! We can work and work and work out in the world, but if we don't have some rootedness in the Word, if we don't have some vision for what God is doing, then we'll just get beaten down and exhausted. And we can read and pray and meditate all day long, but if we can't put that into practice through our relationships with one another, then our faith will remain abstract.

The love of God and love of neighbor can't be separated from each other. We show our love of God through loving our neighbor, and our love of neighbor grows out of our love of God. They are two sides of the same coin.

So if this story is not about dividing up our discipleship and telling us to spend more time meditating, what is Jesus getting at?

Well, notice that Jesus does not criticize Martha simply for being busy. The whole conversation starts because Martha comes to Jesus to criticize Mary. It's masterful triangulation here: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

And that's the danger, right? The danger is to be drawn into comparison with others. Which way of discipleship is better? Who is doing more of the better work? If we think we know which is better, then maybe we can figure out who is better. We can figure out who is in, and who is out. We can figure out who is worthy of being a disciple.

And if there's anything that we've learned from reading Luke the past few weeks, it's that followers of Jesus sometimes end up being very different people than who we think fit the bill. It turns out even a Samaritan can be a disciple. It turns out even a woman can be a disciple, as we see Mary totally ignoring the gender norms for the day and sitting at Jesus' feet to learn. Sometimes the one who we least expect is the one who can reveal Jesus to us the most.

But we're too often too busy trying to figure out who is worthy of our time and attention, too busy trying to put people in categories of good or bad, that we miss what God is doing.

And we see this human impulse to try to figure out who is better, whose work is more worthy, who really belongs, being played out on a national stage right now. I say this not as any kind of partisan commentary; this is not about being Republican or Democrat; this is about how we treat each other as human beings. As people of faith we have to stand up against this impulse to try to name who is better than others, whose work is more valuable than others, who is more deserving than others to be treated with dignity and respect.

Because if we are so busy trying to categorize and divide, so certain who is worthy and who is not, we will, like Martha, miss Jesus in our midst.

So that's the first danger we see played out in this text, but there's another one too. It's not just that we compare ourselves with others and try to figure out who's better, but also that we have this tendency to think of ourselves and our own worth as being totally tied up with what we do.

Are we good enough? Are we serving enough? Are we reading the Bible enough? Does Jesus love us enough? Are we worthy of being a disciple?

It's all too easy to think that we are not "enough" unless we do certain things, unless we've got our lives all together, unless we are perfect hosts and perfect listeners, unless we do all the things right.

But, as Karoline Lewis suggests, maybe this isn't a story about comparison, but rather about completion. What Jesus tries to remind Martha, and us, is that we ARE full. We ARE enough. Not because we've achieved a perfect work-life balance but because, as Colossians reminded us, Jesus "has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him."

And that means we are freed to invite others in and provide hospitality to neighbor and stranger alike. It means we are freed for Bible study and meditation and deepening our relationship with God. It means we are free to spend time considering our relationship with action and contemplation, knowing that these are not what determines our worth but are what flows out of our restored, redeemed relationship with a God who loves us no matter what.

So may we experience this story not as one of judgment but as one of invitation. May we hear the invitation to let go of comparison, let go of weighing ourselves and our discipleship against others. May we experience the grace that allows us to simply open ourselves up to Jesus in our midst. Amen.