

Sermon for July 17, 2022 - Martha and Mary

Well, this is a bit confusing! Last week we read the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus was clear when he said, "Go and do likewise." Actions are a hugely important part of living out our faith... But now, this week, we read the story of Mary and Martha and it sounds like he's saying almost the opposite. Mary gets praised for sitting to listen to Jesus while Martha is doing all the work of providing the hospitality that is required when one has a visitor. So... is Jesus telling us that listening to the Word or learning about God is more important than doing the necessary work? It seems contradictory to what last week's parable was saying... It's confusing!

Did Jesus really chastise Martha for working rather than sitting to listen like her sister Mary? I had to look at this passage a few times to figure out what it was that he was criticizing. Listen again to what he says:

"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."

"...you are worried and distracted by many things..."

It's not really the work he is criticizing, it's the distraction and the worry. It's the busy-ness... It's about losing sight of the fact that they have a guest – a friend who wants to spend time with them – because she is caught up in the details of providing hospitality. Her sister, Mary, on the other hand, is fully present to Jesus.

Have you ever had surprise visitors show up at your door? I have – and I think I can understand what happened with Martha. This wasn't just the next-door neighbour looking to borrow a cup of sugar or share some local gossip; this was their brother Lazarus' close friend. This was not any ordinary visitor; this was the Lord! Martha, being the oldest and the keeper of the household would have immediately looked around and thought, "Oh, my goodness, I wasn't expecting company! The house is a mess! What can I offer him to eat and drink?" She would have gone into hyper hostess mode - and she would have expected her sister, Mary, to pitch in.

Hospitality was a very important part of the culture during the time of Jesus. It was expected that you would welcome the person at your door – even the stranger – with food and drink and a place to stay if needed. Hospitality in those days was much more than good manners – it could mean the difference between life and death because traveling on foot or even by donkey or horse left you very vulnerable, as we saw in last week's reading. Martha saw it as her duty to ensure that the visitor was treated with respect and generosity. This is still true today in many cultures.

Can you imagine having Jesus show up unexpectedly at your door? Mary and Martha would both have seen this as an honour. He was not only their brother's close friend, he was also the well-known and beloved teacher. They would have both been happy to see him. They simply reacted in different ways. Martha immediately set about providing him with the best hospitality; Mary sat with him to engage in conversation, to listen and learn.

Have you ever *been* the surprise visitor, the one who knocks unexpectedly on the door of a beloved friend or relative? You know you will be warmly welcomed – and when they start to fuss “If I had known you were coming I’d have prepared lunch for you! ... Please excuse the mess, I wasn’t expecting company today...” Our response is usually, “Please don’t fuss! I just wanted to spend some time with you...”

This sounds a bit like what Jesus was saying to Martha. “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.”

This is why he had come... to spend time with them...and Martha was missing the point. Oh, she wasn’t doing anything wrong! She was doing exactly what society expected of her. She was being the perfect hostess... but in all the busy-ness of doing so, she was missing time with Jesus. She was missing the point of his visit and she was missing the pleasure of his company.

As church-going folk, we often look at this story and talk about whether we are a Martha or a Mary. Are we the person who spends our time in church in prayer and study, or are we the one who jumps in to make sure the work is done to keep that church functioning? Where would the church be without its “Martha’s”, those faithful folk who perform the tasks of hospitality and service so vital to making the church a welcoming and well-functioning community? And, on the other hand, would it be the same kind of place without the “Mary’s”, the faithful folk who take the time to listen and learn... the ones who take the scripture stories and discern from them what it means to live a Christian life... to figure out just what is needed to help create God’s kingdom here on earth? To figure out just what it is that we should be doing?

Obviously, we need both Mary’s and Martha’s in our church and in our world. We need both the thinkers and the do-ers. And really, is it preferable – or even possible – to be just one or the other?

I have seen it expressed this way:

Both listening and doing, receiving God’s word and serving others, are vital to the Christian life, just as inhaling and exhaling are to breathing. Yet how often do we forget to breathe deeply?

Breathing... we take air in... we let it out... We do it twenty-four hours a day without thinking - but when we breathe deeply, we do it with intention; we do it with awareness.

And, as Christians, it’s important to apply that same kind of intention to our listening and doing. Activism, jumping in to help, without first listening to understand what is needed, leads to aimless “doing” and that can be a dangerous thing. Sometimes it can even aggravate the situation and make it worse.

Only thinking and discussing, on the other hand, might just mean we don't really want to get involved, that we aren't really committed.

It's not really a matter of *whether* to be Mary or Martha... it's more about *when* to be one or the other. We are all different, after all. We each come with unique gifts and unique interests – but as followers of Jesus, we need to be ready to both listen and act. And it won't look the same for all of us.

This story of Mary and Martha has some connections for me to the difference between ordained and diaconal ministry. Most of you know that Rev. Kim and I are in “team ministry” here at BCUC. Both of us are your ministers and are here to offer you the leadership and support you need. We have both gone through years of study and are both equally qualified to serve in congregational ministry. The part that might be a little difficult to understand is that while Rev. Kim is an Ordained Minister, I am a Diaconal Minister. This always takes a bit of explanation because it isn't terribly common in this area of Canada.

The basic difference is this: An Ordained Minister is “ordained” to Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care... a Diaconal Minister is “commissioned” to Christian Education, Service, and Pastoral Care. They are considered to be equal but parallel streams of ministry. Each one's focus is slightly different, particularly in our course of study. We both have extensive training in theology, pastoral care, and liturgy - the worship life of the church.

You might say the *difference* is a bit like the difference between Mary and Martha. It is a matter of what you are called to. I would compare the Ordained Minister to Mary. He or she is called to the study and spreading of the Word and the sacramental work of leading a congregation. The courses leading to ordination are focussed heavily on scripture and theology and also the skills needed to lead a congregation and “care for the flock”. I think Mary would have been called to ordination if she was in the United Church of Canada.

A Diaconal Minister is called to the work that takes church out into the world and brings the world into the church. My courses were more focussed on

- social justice issues and the kind of skills needed to help make change,
- Christian Education for children, youth and adults, and
- caring for the flock, in whatever context I find myself.

Diaconal Ministers very often work in congregational leadership but they might also be found working as chaplains for the military, or at universities, or in prisons, or in community service groups. This, I think, would more likely be the kind of ministry that Martha would be called to do.

Does this mean that Ordained Ministers don't involve themselves in the world outside of the church or that they don't take an interest in social justice and Christian education? Of course not! Nor does it mean that Diaconal Ministers don't study scripture and theology or that they don't feel connected to the sacraments. It's a matter of where you feel your gifts and skills more closely connect to the work of ministry. And it's not an easy decision to make! And that's one reason our discernment process in the United Church is lengthy and robust. A lot of soul

searching and discussion goes into the work of figuring out just what the Spirit is calling you to do, what role you are being called to fill. It's complicated because there is not a clear and unmoving line between the work of the Ordained and the Diaconal Minister. It is more of a spectrum. For instance, I have classmates who would never choose to be in the pulpit on a Sunday morning and yet others, like myself, feel very drawn to congregational work, including preaching and leading worship, and serving the sacraments of communion and baptism. As well there are many ordained ministers who take their work out into the world working in missions and marching in protests and Pride Parades.

It's not an "either/or". It's more of a "both/and". They are not exclusive of each other. I think if we asked Jesus which one is most important, his answer would be, "Yes". When Rev. Kim and I talk about our roles here at BCUC, we know that we both have the same commitment to our faith with all of its writings and traditions – and we know that we both have the same commitment to taking the work of being followers of Jesus out into the world. The difference in our training and preparation for the role of ministers at BCUC offers a richness that neither of us would have individually. We learn from each other and we hope that this also translates into a rich experience for all of you.

In the same way, Mary and Martha are not exclusive of each other. The fact that Martha expects that Mary would help her in her hospitality tasks tells us that this is a role that Mary would be accustomed to filling. The fact that Jesus reminds Martha that it is important to take time to be present to her visitor, tells us that she loves, and is loved by, Jesus.

The work is important. We know that. Over and over in scripture, the lesson for us is that loving God means taking action, that the hallmark of a Christian is in how he or she lives, not in how he or she thinks...and it takes contemplation to lead to thoughtful and authentic action. We need both.

Sometimes we can get so caught up in the busy-ness of "doing" that we can lose sight of why we are doing it. It's important to take time to "sit at Jesus' feet". It's not simply a matter of focus, it is also an important part of avoiding burnout. We don't have to look far to find volunteers who take on everything, or ministers who feel responsible for everything, or caregivers who focus all of their energy on others. We need to make sure they make time to take a break – that we *give* them that time to rest and to leave the busy-ness behind, to allow time for the Spirit to refresh them. It's so easy to forget... especially for the Martha's.

I am inspired, really, by our Muslim neighbours who schedule time for prayer daily – not once but five times! An imam once said that the faithful and frequent practice of "sitting in the presence of the Holy" - like Mary - gives him a certain clarity about what to do next.

"Martha, Martha, dear friend, you are worried and distracted by many things..." Jesus wasn't rebuking Martha for being busy but for losing focus. His visit wasn't about the food, it was about the company.

So, is it better to be a Mary or a Martha? Jesus would say, "Yes". The world needs us to be both.

Amen.