

A Tale of Two Sisters

Years ago, I knew a young woman who served at the U.S. Capitol as a congressional page. Who worked in the Columbia statehouse office of South Carolina's lieutenant governor. Who was a delegate at a national political convention. Who interned for a member of the United States House of Representatives and for a United States Senator. Amazingly, she accomplished all of this *before* she reached the age of twenty-one and before she graduated from college.

This young woman had a T-shirt she sometimes wore. A T-shirt with a message printed on it. On that T-shirt were these words: "A woman's place is in the House. And in the Senate."

Today, in Luke's Gospel, we hear a story that seems at first glance to be about a woman's place. A woman named Martha welcomes a traveler, a guest, a friend into her home, which she shares with her sister, Mary. After he arrives, Martha does exactly what her culture expects of her. And her sister Mary does just the opposite. Shocking Luke's first readers. Pretty straightforward, right?

Well, maybe not so much. It's not quite that simple. As is usually the case when Jesus is involved, there's more to this narrative than meets the eye.

To begin with, for nearly two thousand years, interpreters haven't been able to agree about this tale of two sisters. Christian believers have been taking sides. Which sister does the right thing?

That's what we try to figure out. We're human creatures, all of us. And there's something in our human condition that makes us want to view the world in terms of winners and losers. Black and white. Who's right? Who's wrong?

If you're on Mary's side, you might contend that what she does can't be wrong, because Jesus commends her and praises her for it. On the other hand, if you side with Martha, you might claim that she must be in the right because—after all—she's acting in accordance with the traditional rules that have been put in place for her. She's following a strict set of social boundaries.

Unlike her sister Mary, who does something that women of her time and place just don't do. She, an unmarried woman, actually approaches and enters into the presence of a man. And not just any man—a teacher! Only men are permitted to gather

around a teacher. But Mary sits at his feet. Mary listens to him. Mary spends time with him. Mary is in relationship with him. And she leaves all the work to her sister!

Kind of makes you want to sympathize with Martha, doesn't it? Poor overworked, overburdened Martha. Maybe she, too, would really like to spend some time with Jesus. But she's preoccupied. All she can think about is everything she has to do. She's concerned and worried about getting everything done.

It's usually taken for granted that Martha is preparing a meal for her guest. But we need to be careful about assuming that she's got flour on her hands and gravy on her apron. Because Luke never specifies what it is that's keeping Martha so busy. He says only that she has so many tasks, she's driven to the point of distraction. She feels pulled in several directions at the same time.

And isn't that how you and I feel sometimes? Overwhelmed? The Puritan work ethic has been deeply engrained in us. We live in a society that measures our worth, not by who we *are*, but by what we *do* and how well we do it. In school, we get graded on how well we write papers and how well we do on tests. In the workplace, we get performance evaluations.

We get evaluated on *how much* we do. It's all about productivity. When I first started out in banking, I worked for a financial institution that required its employees to complete a daily productivity report. Each teller had to give an accounting of the number of transactions completed—both debits and credits—and the total amount of cash taken in and paid out. Productivity determined eligibility for continued employment, pay raises, and promotions. All these years later, I can still remember the feeling of apprehension that I wouldn't measure up to that employer's standards.

But sometimes it's not even *about* someone else's standards. Sometimes we are our own most severe taskmasters. And you know, that word "we" includes some of us pastors and some of you in the pews. We keep on trying to multi-task. We lay a lot of stress on ourselves. We make endless to-do lists for ourselves. And often, we assign ourselves more work than we can possibly get done in a day or even in a week. But the more we accomplish, the more chores we cross off those lists, the more able we are to see ourselves as superman or superwoman.

By the way, did you know that the Bible paints a telling portrait of someone who's considered a superwoman? You'll find

her in the last chapter of Proverbs. If you have a few moments this week, I invite you to read about her. This woman in Proverbs was the subject of a sermon I once heard Bishop Will Willimon preach. Here's a brief synopsis of what he said: *This person, although highly praised in the Scriptures, is always working. Day and night. She doesn't rest. She's an over-achiever.* He concluded his sermon with these words: *She is an atheist!*

That was a surprising statement. But as I thought about it, I began to understand what Bishop Willimon meant when he said it. This woman in the last chapter of Proverbs has no time for God.

Jesus' words to Martha are an expression of his desire that she lay her work aside, at least for a while, and spend some time with him. God in Christ Jesus yearns for intimate communion and relationship with you and me. And Luke helps us understand that truth through this tale of two sisters.

Whose names have been remembered by believers through twenty centuries. One particular church, when it opened its doors several years ago, was named the Church of Saints Martha and Mary. When I googled this church, I learned that in the United

States and Canada, there are quite a *few* churches bearing the names of Martha and Mary.

And there's a good reason for that: The church needs both Marys *and* Marthas. The church needs male and female Marys and Marthas. Heaven knows, the church needs Marthas!

It needs Marthas to set the Lord's Table and play the music and arrange the flowers and prepare the bulletins and count the offering and pay the bills and make the sandwiches and vacuum the floor and mow the lawn and set the thermostat and do the zillion other things that cry out to be done in the household of faith.

Are you a Martha kind of person? When Luke mentions Martha's many tasks, he uses the Greek word for *service*. What she's actually involved in is *much service*. Martha shows us how to serve and love her neighbor. Martha loves her neighbor, whose name is Jesus.

But those of us who are driven by an inner Martha need to be careful. Careful that we don't stay so busy doing things *for* Jesus that we have no time left to spend *with* Jesus.

The church needs people who sit at the feet of Christ! The church needs the clarity of vision and the creative inspiration of

its Marys. Maybe you've come to a place in your life where you've become more inclined to take some time apart from constant busy-ness. To let the anxieties and the tensions of a demanding schedule fall away. To live in a more reflective, contemplative way. To open your spirit to the word of God. To hear in your heart the whispers of God. To be still and know that God is God. Mary shows us how to love God. Mary loves her God, revealed in Jesus.

Love for God. Love for the neighbor. These loves are at the very center of a life of following Christ. Just as breathing—inhaling and exhaling—are essential to physical life.

Inhaling. That comes first. You have to inhale before you can exhale. First, you breathe in. You let yourself be filled. In the same way, the love of God fills you. The sequence has significance. Loving God is the first of two great commandments. The second great commandment, loving the neighbor, is like exhaling—being able to empty yourself because you have first been filled. Out of the first, the second flows freely and naturally. Breathing in. Breathing out. Love for God. Love for the neighbor. These loves are the rhythms of a faithful life. These loves are so closely connected as to be two parts of the same whole.

Two sides of the same coin. That's the way it is with these two sisters we meet today. The good news is that you and I don't have to *choose* between Mary and Martha. We don't have to identify with one at the expense of the other. It's not a case of either-or. It's *both-and!* Both Mary *and* Martha.

We need them both. We learn from them both. And hopefully, the spirits of both of them dwell within each of us, in balance. In harmony with one another. Because, taken together, Mary and Martha offer a model for the *rest* of us disciples of Jesus. A model for living the life to which he calls us.

In her worship, Mary expresses love for God. In her service, Martha makes love for the neighbor visible. From this tale of two sisters, two complementary dimensions emerge. They give our discipleship its shape. They offer a pattern that begins when you and I gather in worship. A pattern that continues as we scatter in service—in service to a hurting world. In the service of a kingdom that has just two rules: Love God; love your neighbor. Keys to the one thing, the *only* thing that's needed: the blessed fullness of life in Jesus Christ.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.