

Luke 10:38-42 “Mary and Martha; A Jesus Moment”

Luke’s gospel rushes from the story of the victim in a ditch and the Samaritan who neighbors him to the story of Martha’s hosting Jesus. Both stories are well known. While few defend those who passed by the victim in the ditch, ‘Martha’ circles have abounded in our churches.

Men as well as women have defended the ‘practical work’ that churches require – the maintenance of the property, the fellowship meals, and the preparation of the sanctuary. Like the lawyer, ‘seeking to justify himself,’ they challenge Jesus’ comments as ‘a bit hard on Martha.’

The story seems to play into the lack of appreciation of those who actually do the work, who make sure that the beds are made, the trash is taken out, and the meals prepared. “Just wait and see,” they say. “If you’re sick or hungry, would you rather have a Mary or a Martha to take care of you?”

They identify themselves as the ones who get little credit or ‘face time’ with the leadership. It seems to be those who speak in public, who lead from the front of the room, and those present with them who are the really valued figures. The ‘Martha’s’ are called in from the kitchen at the end of the meeting, given a round of applause, and politely thanked. But they aren’t part of the decision-making, and rarely does anyone know their name.

Others have defended Jesus – Mary had stepped out of the role of a ‘mere woman,’ and sat at Jesus’ feet. This was the posture of a disciple, and a role usually reserved for men. Contemporary attitudes were that women should not be so educated, nor honored. Jesus was breaking down old images, and bringing a more inclusive style. Jesus was allowing Mary to pursue her own vocation, and refusing to force her into a ‘traditional’ role when she had chosen a different one. Jesus was protecting Mary’s desire to hear the word of life, and honoring her commitment to the journey of the spirit.

But apart from these two positions on traditional roles, it is interesting to do a closer reading of the text. Sometimes scripture seems to say one thing on the surface, but another when we pay attention to exactly what is said, and what is not said.

Martha comes into the room anxious towards both Jesus and her sister. Mary’s left her alone and Jesus doesn’t care. She stands over Jesus – in contrast to Mary who’s at his feet. A close reading of the text shows Martha saying ‘my’ once and ‘me’ three times in one sentence. ‘Don’t YOU care that MY sister has left ME alone to serve? Tell her to help ME!’

The problem isn’t that Martha has too much of a load. The problem is that she thinks she shouldn’t have the problem she has. And she wants Jesus to fix it.

Luke 12: 13 has a similar passage: 'Bid my brother to share my inheritance with me.' I have this problem that's really bothering me. Fix it! Jesus' answer: 'Who made me your probate judge?'

The issue here is not one of a spiritual engagement rather than a practical one. The issue is not that it is better and nobler to study than to serve; this is Jesus, who John portrays as washing the disciples' feet, and who compared the priest and the Levite to the Samaritan just before this.

Martha's issue is anger over a problem she shouldn't have to face. That leads to trying to force a 'right answer' from Jesus using attack language. Jesus' issue wasn't Martha's service rather than Mary's 'spirituality'. The Samaritan had done service as well and been commended for being a neighbor. Jesus' issue was Martha's anxiety and her demand that Jesus change things to make things 'fair.'

Luke's Jesus doesn't take on solving the problems people think they shouldn't have. Jesus isn't about making the world a fairer place, or balancing accounts, or forcing everyone to play well together.

Most of us do well with problems that we've accepted as 'ours.' We do well with the workload waiting for us at the office, but we get very upset when we're cut off in traffic. We accept the heavy loads of raising children, but become anxious when our children don't perform well in public. The problems we think we shouldn't have become the disasters that destroy relationships and make peace impossible.

Unacceptable problems leave us trying to use guilt and manipulation to force a problem to disappear. They leave us demonizing our opponents, and seeking to destroy rather than to resolve.

Jesus' answer isn't what Martha wanted to hear. Her bullying style of standing over Jesus and Mary didn't get the response she wanted. Talking in front of Mary to Jesus didn't lead to Mary's humiliation, nor to Jesus' giving in to her with a mumbled "I guess you better go help your sister." Jesus defended Mary, and challenged Martha. It was a 'Jesus Moment' for both Martha and Mary.

And there's another layer here. What does it mean to have a 'Jesus moment?' What was the Word that Mary and Martha were hearing from Jesus? It clearly wasn't "you have to be good to be saved," nor was it "just feel good and it will all be all right."

Sometimes we confuse a Jesus moment with a sense of beauty. We see the brilliant colors of a sunset, or the covering of poppies on the mountain, and we are captured beyond ourselves for a moment. Beauty can capture us, but an esthetic moment can come and go, and leave us the same.

We can also confuse a Jesus moment with a passionate moral commitment. Have you ever felt that you were really, really right about something? And been willing to do

serious damage to make it happen? That sense of being right is exhilarating, and can lead to real change. But it can also be damagingly self-righteous.

A 'Jesus Moment' for Martha – and for the lawyer in the previous story – is a moment of humiliation. It is a disclosure that one has been self-justifying, caught up in one's own anxieties, and willing to hurt others. It is a disclosure of little faith, revealing an abuse of trust.

The immediate human response to a 'Jesus Moment' is a desire to say "NO!" It is a struggle with fear and anger, even for a flashing moment. It is accompanied by a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that I've been caught.

"Martha, Martha." Jesus speaks with love and with care to Martha. She is not less beloved than Mary. She is not rejected or turned away. Jesus does not despise her. The third element of a "Jesus Moment," is 'live your life.' 'Pick up your bed and walk.' 'Go and do likewise.'

Our center as the ecclesia – the called out ones of Jesus Christ – is not our ability to sustain expensive buildings or pay salaries to our staff. Our center is our shared reliance on the Word and Sacraments that sustain our awareness of God's love and call. We have 'Jesus Moment' happenings throughout our lives.

Our difference is that we recognize them for what they are – a grounding of ourselves in God's love rather than in our own righteousness; a freedom to do what is truly needed rather than resenting our limits. Humiliation can lead to humility, and acceptance of our real call and belovedness.

'Jesus Moments' can happen to anyone, at anytime. It is our unique calling to name them, and to declare their lordship over all our lives.

Amen.