

**Sermon: July 28, 2019 – Luke 10: 38-42 – Mary & Martha (week two: Martha)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Today, our gospel reading is the same as last Sunday: the story of Mary and Martha. Mary, the contemplative, got her time last Sunday, through an exploration of the life and words of the English mystic, Julian of Norwich. This week, it's Martha's turn, and a different approach.

Martha's story is harder for me, because it strikes close to home and I may not be eager to hear all that Jesus has to say here. I grew up in a very traditional household, where Mom did all of the at-home Martha tasks, and I was trained to thank the cook at EVERY meal – and then do the dishes. Whether by nature or nurture, that Martha energy found a home in me, most clearly expressed in the dozen years I worked in a school office. That was a really busy office and a really busy job, and it confirmed how much happier I am when I'm busy. Once, one of the teachers described the diverse work done in the office as the "glue" that held things together and my co-worker and I decided that we weren't really the glue, but we definitely provided the oil: often invisible, but things would grind to a halt without it.

So it's hard to hear the story of Mary and Martha, with that other sister praised for sitting at the feet of the master, absorbing all that wisdom, while the sister I more easily identify with gets snubbed for running around keeping everyone's wine glass filled while also getting dinner ready for a crowd. The Greek in this passage (cf. Davis) doesn't just indicate that Martha was busy; she was frantic, even discombobulated, scrambling after everyone's needs. The Greek does not indicate whether Martha was tempted to accidentally miss her sister's wine glass on the 3rd refill and have her wear the wine instead, but I can identify with Martha's level of frustration. There appears to be a real injustice in the whole situation, and in Jesus' assessment of it, for without the hard work of Martha, Mary doesn't get the luxury to sit at Jesus' feet and take in all his wonderful teachings.

We are used to Jesus choosing sides, in favour of the poor rather than the rich, in favour of the one being excluded over the one doing the excluding, but this looks very much like a dismissal of an entire population of people whose crime was that they were too helpful. People who are experts in the Enneagram tell me that Martha is a classic "two" (cf. Beesing) amongst the nine basic personality types, and for sure she had the treasured spiritual gift of hospitality. From an organizational and spiritual and even societal standpoint, I don't know what is gained by alienating the gifts of people who see what needs doing, and then do it.

Clearly, in a very brief story we don't see the complexity of either Martha or Mary's personhood, just a quick caricature to help make a general point. But even knowing that, why does Jesus so under-appreciate the value of Martha's faithful service? Why does he put such emphasis on contemplation and so little on action? What is the good news of Jesus Christ delivered to Martha and through Martha?

One theory I have, for which I have found no scholarly back-up but I'll share anyway, is that Jesus and/or the author of the gospel of Luke are making a social statement here.

Hospitality was, and is, a core value in Middle Eastern cultures. In a dry and dusty place, offering water and a meal and a safe place to spend the night is crucial. And in nearly every culture, women have always been at the forefront of offering such hospitality.

At the same time, many cultures then and now have very specific rules or assumptions about keeping women in a subordinate role, including minimal emphasis on female literacy. And yet in the book of Acts – written, most likely, by the same author as the gospel of Luke – we read that the viability of many first-century Churches depended on leadership roles performed by women.

So in this story of Mary and Martha, do we perhaps hear Jesus saying: Mary, don't you dare let anyone tell you that your life can only be defined by your ability at household tasks. And don't let any man tell you that you have to go through him, in order to learn about me. And while it comes across as a rebuke, does Jesus also say to Martha: I know you'll be praised for the care and attention you put into taking care of our needs, and that you're proud of the good work you do for us, but at some point would you please put down the broom and take off the apron, and breathe deeply of the goodness of God's word for your life, too? Your sister isn't better than you but you gotta know that the choice that she has made is available to you as well.

As I said, I haven't found any authors to back me up on that one so perhaps it is just grist for the mill. What I have come across, however, is some excellent online discussion about this passage, which recommends that we set this episode – of Jesus and Martha and Mary - in the context of the whole journey of Jesus and his followers, from Galilee to Jerusalem. For when we take a broader view, we see a rather masterful balancing between active service, such as we see in Martha, and contemplative devotion, such as we see in Mary.

At the end of Luke chapter 9 (v.51), Jesus decides that it is time to leave Galilee and head to Jerusalem. The first thing he does, in the Sunday reading we heard three weeks ago (Luke 10: 1-18) is to send 70/72 disciples ahead of him. This mission, I would say, is a balance of contemplation and action: Jesus discerns that they have learned enough to bring the word and God's healing power to people who need a revitalized life, and then he trusts them to do it. They've spent time learning at Jesus' feet, now it's time to do something with it.

Two weeks ago, the Sunday gospel (Luke 10: 25-37) brought us closer to Jerusalem. A teacher of the law approaches Jesus, and in their interchange the teacher puts together two commands from the Torah which we know, together, as the "Great Commandment"- that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbour as ourselves. Again, there is balance here: loving God, and loving Neighbour... spending contemplative time with the Holy One, and engaging in active, tangible expressions of love for those in need.

At the end of that interchange, the teacher of the Law asks Jesus a loaded question, "but who is my neighbour?" As in, "you don't expect me to love anyone other than people of my own faith who behave perfectly, do you?" to which Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

In that parable, a traveler from Jerusalem down to Jericho is beaten, robbed and left for dead. A Samaritan – who would have been assumed by the audience first hearing this parable to be completely outside a correct understanding of God's law – is the hero of the story because he DOES something. Assumed to be uneducated or mis-educated in the Torah, he nevertheless embodies the love of God for a person in need. Meanwhile, the villains, or at least the goats, of the story are the Priest and the Levite, on their way home from Temple duties, well-trained in the ways of God - yet they avoid the wounded traveler. They had their reasons, but they took all that they know about God, turned that into doing NOTHING, and they look BAAAAAD.

So if we look at the journey thus far, a balance emerges:

- The spiritually prepared disciples get active and go into the towns. (contemplation leads to action).
- The greatest commandment of the Torah gets named as a balance between devotion to God (contemplation) and service of neighbour (action).
- Two devout (contemplative) religious insiders walk by a situation of need, and a complete outsider shows God's love by practical concern and action for a wounded neighbour.
- In the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, the open listening and learning of Mary (contemplation) is elevated above the busy service (action) of her sister Martha.

- And if we were to read forward into the 11th chapter (verses 1-4) – the reading that is actually appointed for today, set aside to do a second week on Mary and Martha – Jesus teaches The Lord’s Prayer, and its expression of hope that who we are and what we do, will mirror the will of God, integrating action and contemplation in a healthy, wholistic balance.

This overall balancing may not be the most satisfying answer to Jesus’ praising of Mary over Martha, but I think it does show an understanding that in Jesus’ mind, both contemplation and action are needed and valued in the life of discipleship. And while it can be tricky using one gospel to complete another, while we’re in the business of getting a big-picture view let’s also look at the other place we know about Mary and Martha: the gospel of John, chapter 11.

In that story, Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary, dies, and Jesus eventually draws near to their home. Then, in the words of the Good News translation: “²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, ‘If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died!’ ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask him for.” As the conversation continues, Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and those who live and believe in me will never die”. Clearly, Mary isn’t the only one in this household who has thought about life and belief; Martha is first to encounter Jesus, she states her belief in him, and in the gospel narrative that discussion is productive – it leads Jesus to that profound proclamation of resurrection hope. His interaction a few moments later with Mary and her supportive friends leads Jesus to tears, and the sum total of the interactions have him go to the tomb and raise Lazarus to life. But in John, there’s not the same degree of spiritual hierarchy between the sisters: the discipleship of Martha is affirmed, as well as her sister’s. And in some early traditions, both sisters were among those at the foot of the cross.

Viewed through this cross-gospel lens, and through the entirety of the trip to Jerusalem, it’s clear that Jesus loves and respects active Martha, not just contemplative Mary. Jesus is not rejecting the gift of hospitality exhibited by Martha, nor is he telling people who naturally help others, to stop doing so. There’s no way he would have told the parable of the Good Samaritan immediately before this scene with Martha and Mary, if he’d planned to reject the importance of love-infused action. But Jesus is saying something really important in the household of Martha and Mary about a balanced life, which is every bit as true now as it was then.

Dr Elizabeth Hartney is an expert on the problem of over-work, and the phenomenon of work addiction. She writes, “Although a widely recognized and accepted concept in popular culture, and despite the existence of forty years of literature on the subject, work addiction is not a formally recognized medical condition or mental disorder (in that it does not appear in the current version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the DSM-V.) One of the reasons for this lack of recognition of work addiction is that work—even excessive work—is typically thought of as a positive trait rather than a problem. Overwork is rewarded, both financially and culturally, and may lead to the worker being seen in a more positive light....

“As with other addictions,” she continues, “work addiction is driven by compulsion, rather than by a healthy sense of fulfillment that is common among people who simply put a lot of effort and dedication into their job, or people who are deeply committed to their work as a vocation. In fact, people who fall prey to work addiction may be quite unhappy and distressed about work, they may be overly concerned about work, they may feel out of control of their desire to work, and they may spend so much time, energy, and effort on work that it impairs non-work relationships and activities outside of work.”

Everything that Dr Hartney has written here about workaholism, is also applicable to those of us on the “Martha” end of the personal and spiritual spectrum. There’s nothing wrong with DOING

things, especially those things that bring support and care into the lives of others, and thank goodness for those who see needs and repeatedly step up to do what needs to be done.

But when the doing turns into a compulsion, it's a problem:

- When we keep doing and doing and doing and not stopping to reflect, and learn, and rejuvenate, it's a problem.
- When we ignore the wisdom of sabbath (cf. Muller) – taking one time out of seven to stop working and simply bask in the glories of God and the gift of life – it's a problem.
- When our doing more and more is received by those around us as a statement that they are incompetent – it's a problem.
- When we figure that taking time to pray is a waste of time because there are so many people with so many needs to be met, or go so far as to take the Divine out of Church life, it's a problem.
- And perhaps most soul-destroying of all: if we ever find that we have tied our self-worth to doing and doing and doing some more, we may start to believe that God wouldn't love us if we ever got off the Merry-Go-Round of activity, and that is not only a problem; it simply is not true.

For the Marthas who have a service-minded temperament, and for the Marys who are drawn to ponder the mysteries of the holy, and for all the variations between those two, there's a message here: make sure that all your life, those things that really define you and indeed all the things you say "yes" to (cf. Copeland), is grounded in love. We engage with God in reading and prayer and silence, out of love. We serve and assist neighbours in need, out of love. God is honoured when we love our neighbour, and our neighbour is blessed when we are grateful for God's gift of life. In the household so capably managed by Martha, Jesus encouraged the grace of slowing down and enjoying God's holy presence, even as Jesus had challenged a learned man to get more active in his faith, by telling the story of a good Samaritan. Our lives as individuals and our life together as a community of faith are not active or contemplative; our lives are both active AND contemplative, and all of it finds encouragement in Christ Jesus.

May this be so. Amen.

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