Jesus Visits Martha and Mary
Luke 10:38-42
6th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C July 20, 2025
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Good morning, friends. Last week we unpacked the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. Recall that a parable is a fictional story that Jesus told to help his listeners better understand the kingdom of God. That parable was a very active example of an unexpected person coming to the aid of a man who had been beaten and robbed by bandits on the Jericho Road. The lawyer who was testing Jesus begrudgingly replied that the one who had showed mercy was the neighbor. He couldn't even say that it was a hated Samaritan who assisted a Jewish man. Jesus told the lawyer to go and do likewise, to show mercy to someone else.

In contrast to last week, today's reading is not a parable, but rather, recounts Jesus' meeting with his friends, Martha and Mary. He is continuing on the road to Jerusalem, but stops in Bethany, where we know the sisters lived in Martha's home. This in itself is an unusual detail, since women normally lived in the home of their father, husband, or brother. Martha may be a widow. We don't know. The only other places the sisters are mentioned is in John 11 and 12:1-11, when Jesus raises their brother Lazarus from the dead. This is truly a miracle, because Lazarus has been in entombed for four days (John 11:17), the point at which the Jews considered a person was truly dead, with no hope of revival.

Today's reading begins in Luke 10:38, immediately following the parable of the Good Samaritan. Martha welcomes Jesus into her home and proceeds to prepare a meal for him. She is showing very good hospitality, as was the custom. She was also playing the expected role of a woman as she tended to domestic duties. Many readers point to her independence and industriousness.

Mary, however, is a different story. She sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him teach, just as a man would be expected to do. We might suppose that Martha feels her sister is simply lazy, that she doesn't want to help. Here she is racing around, trying to be a good hostess for her friend Jesus, while Mary just sat and listened.

Imagine Martha's surprise when Jesus seems to rebuke her, saying that Mary has chosen the better part. "What?" we can almost hear Martha exclaim. "How can Mary's do-nothing but sit and listen be better than all than I am doing for you?"

Commentator Richard Floyd helps us to understand the history of this story when he writes in his sermon, “Distracted by Many Things,” (https://richardlfloyd.com/2019/07/22/distracted-by-many-things-a-sermon-on-luke-1038-42/)

> The history of this text’s interpretation is an interesting one. In the Middle Ages this text was employed to privilege the monastic life over life in “the world.” It was considered more blessed in the eyes of God to be in a monastery praying than in a village working and raising a family. One of the first things that Martin Luther, himself a monk, did in his reforms was to abolish the monasteries. He also took a former nun as his wife. He developed a new doctrine of vocation in which every person can honor God in their work. He challenged the idea that the monastic life was the true religious life. (end of quotation)

Another commentator, Jennifer Wyant, helps us to understand this story from a contemporary point of view when she writes:

> The problem wasn’t that Martha was serving, which is worse than sitting at Jesus’ feet. The problem was that she was distracted by the wrong things. She became focused on the fact that her sister wasn’t helping. Like the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Pharisee in the Parable of the Tax Collector, Martha is focused on the actions of others and their perceived shortcomings, as opposed to focusing on her own relationship with Jesus. It is this misorientation, not her service or her hospitality, that leads to Jesus’ gentle rebuke. Mary has chosen God as her portion, and that will never be taken away.(“Working Preacher,” 2025; end of quotation)

So, what we have here is not a choice between Mary’s contemplative lifestyle over Martha’s activity. It’s not *what* Martha is doing; it’s how she’s doing it. One way is not better than the other. In fact, the parable of the Good Samaritan clearly demonstrates the importance of actively serving others, even those we don’t know or consider friends. Rev. Wyant continues:

> In this way, the story of these two sisters serves as a powerful example for disciples today. It turns out that maybe Luke isn’t attempting to prioritize one act of Christian discipleship over another. Maybe instead he is presenting the idea that we can do right and good things but still be distracted by the wrong things. We can focus more on the perceived shortcomings of those around us than on our own relationship with Jesus.

> So yes, in Luke, disciples both serve and listen to the word, just as disciples today navigate both the contemplative and the active practices of faith. Sometimes we slay dragons, and sometimes we start monasteries. But Luke's deeper concern is that our orientation be in the right place: that we focus on Jesus, and let the main thing be the main thing.

In reality, we are not looking at two different styles of discipleship: one active, one contemplative. Can we say that one is better than the other? No, only that they are different and equally important. Rev. Wyant also reports on a medieval legend that makes this point:

> In this story, which takes place after the resurrection of Jesus, she (Martha) becomes a traveling preacher and ends up in a small town in France that, unfortunately, has a chronic dragon problem. She manages to slay the dragon and, in doing so, wins the whole town over to Christianity. In that same story, her sister Mary, on that same trip, ends up starting a monastery in the wilderness, meaning they both live out the roles assigned to them in Christian history: Martha acts and Mary studies. Martha represents an active faith, while Mary represents a contemplative faith. (end of quotation).

While we often try to make things black or white, we realize that Luke does not do that. He doesn't want us to think that either Martha's way or Mary's way is wrong. Instead, he wants us to see that Mary's way is preferable in this instance, because she has her eyes focused on Jesus. She has, indeed, chosen the "better part" by not allowing herself to become distracted by the cares of the world.

Whether we want to admit it or not, I think many of us are more like Martha than Mary. Our cellphones and I-Pads are on long before and long after work hours. Televisions are blaring out the latest news, which often isn't good. We're distracted by people in leadership positions whose morals and truth-telling don't square with our Christian understandings. Even simple things, like the dog scratching at the door to go out, distract us from what we should be focused on, namely Jesus. The sands of time slip through our fingers as we channel-surf from one thing to the next, never concentrating on anything of importance.

Yet, during this Ordinary Time, we are to be zeroing in on how to be good disciples. The issue isn't how I am a contemplative disciple or an active disciple. Rather, we need to learn that these are two sides of the same coin. Our contemplative side needs to take time to pray and to study God's word. Our active side needs to live out what we've learned, doing all

we can to love God and love neighbor. Just being active or being contemplative is not enough. We have to do both.

But how? Some of us are naturally more active than others. We don't find much joy or motivation simply by sitting around. Perhaps this is because we have been taught to be active. After all, "idle hands do the devil's work." Well, maybe, but we need to study the Scriptures to know what God would have us to do. In other words, we need to know what to do before we try to do it.

What about you? Do you perceive yourself to be more active or more contemplative? Suhail Stevens shows Jesus being both active and contemplative, using these examples. Yet, these same accounts also show Jesus prioritizing just *being*. Emulating Jesus' life means being both active a*nd* contemplative.

Jesus: The Active Figure

> Especially in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' life seems like a whirlwind of activity. He gets baptized, is tempted, preaches, drives out demons, heals multitudes, and cleanses lepers. And that's all in the first chapter!
>
> Later, things get even busier and Mark tells us, "so many people were coming and going [to Jesus and his disciples] that they did not even have a chance to eat."

Jesus: The Contemplative Figure

> Yet, tucked into the first chapter is this glittering verse: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."
>
> Other Gospels, especially Luke, characterize Jesus by saying he "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Jesus is regularly in solitude, with his Father. This habit was prevalent enough to be noticed and recorded (end of quotation).

Clearly, Jesus models for us the contemplative and active lifestyle. It is not a matter of either/or, but of both/and. Somehow we have to find a balance. Although it's likely that we, like the proverbial leopard, cannot change our spots, we may be able to find a better balance between the two ways of being. If we think in terms of today's story, maybe Mary and Martha could both first listen to Jesus and then prepare a meal, or vice versa. Either way, they could both do what needs to be done to show hospitality and keep themselves focused on Jesus. That, truly, is the better part.

Your challenge for this week is to try to determine if you are more active, more contemplative, or well-balanced. Keep a written record of what you do. Then, if you are out of balance, make a plan for living more faithfully as

one who is both active and contemplative. This may not be a 50/50 split, but it will likely be better than what you are doing. See how that works for you.

In closing, Nan wants to thank all who have given leadership to worship. She is grateful for your prayers and remembrances. Nan also wants to let you know, as printed in the bulletin insert, that she will be retiring at the end of August. This isn't what she wants to do, but feels she must do, given her health situation. You are wonderful folks, and it has been her joy to serve as your pastor for the past six years. She trusts you will give the new pastor the same love and respect you have given her.

Love, Nan