

Only One Thing

Luke 10:38-42

But the Lord answered her, "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." (Luke 10:41-42)

What do our domestic lives reveal about our relationships with God? What priorities, preoccupations, and anxieties do we lay bare in the way we conduct ourselves in our homes? In this Gospel story, Jesus's good friend, Martha, welcomes Jesus into her house. As soon as he arrives, Martha busies herself with the practical work of hospitality, cleaning, organizing, cooking, and serving. Meanwhile, her sister, Mary, sits at Jesus's feet and listens to his teaching, paying no attention to her harried sister.

It's a simple scene, its dramas small and subtle, but I cherish it for that very reason. I know this world—the world of quiet resentments that play out between close family members, the secret yearnings we harbor as we move through our daily chores and responsibilities, the martyr complexes we give into even as we attempt to be generous. This is a world I can relate to. Apparently, so can Jesus.

Luke's account doesn't tell us how long Martha holds her tongue after Jesus and his disciples arrive. I imagine she spends a good hour or so in the kitchen, banging pots and slamming drawers, hoping to catch someone's attention. Eventually her frustration boils over, and hospitality gives way to confrontation: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me" (Luke 10:40).

It's quite the accusation. "Lord, do you not care?" Ouch. This isn't just frustration; it's a sense of abandonment. Of betrayal.

If I were in Jesus's place, I think I would give Mary a nudge into the kitchen, at the very least to keep the peace and ward off further conflict between the sisters. But Jesus redirects Martha instead: "You are worried and



distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.”

I’ll confess at the start that Jesus’s response leaves me feeling conflicted. Here are some of the reasons why:

I grew up in a traditional South Asian community that placed a high value on hospitality. I also grew up in an ethnic and religious context where “women’s work” carried little spiritual value. Some of my earliest and most vivid memories involve sari-clad women (my mother, my aunts, and dozens of other “church ladies”) hovering over tables laden with fragrant dishes, refilling a cup of juice here, offering a third helping of rice and chicken curry there, mopping up a coffee spill somewhere else—while the men talked, studied, debated, relaxed, and feasted.

Whether the occasion was a weekday home Bible study, a Sunday evening potluck, or the all-church Christmas party, the women prepped, cooked, served, and cleaned to make the gathering festive and fun. They did so with a strong sense of dignity and pride; after all, this was the work they had been raised to do. It was the work that marked their identities as “good women of God.” But it didn’t take me long as a kid to figure out that what counted as “real” spiritual work was the work the men did. The work of preaching, teaching, and leading worship.

To be fair, I don’t think this was because the men were bad people. I think it was because the patriarchal culture that raised them made sure they never experienced the inside of a kitchen, a pantry, a clothes dryer, or a bottle of Pine Sol. They never saw the work that makes hospitality possible.

This is some of the baggage I bring to Martha’s story, so when I read Jesus’s response to her, my first response is disappointment. Yes, Jesus elevates the status of women by affirming Mary’s right to discipleship. (Traditionally, only male disciples sat at a rabbi’s feet to study the Torah.) This gender reversal is significant, and I don’t take it for granted.

And yet. I want Jesus to do more. I want him to round up his (male) disciples, usher them into the kitchen, and direct them to bake the bread, fry the fish, and chop the vegetables—ideally, while Martha takes a much-needed nap. I want him to say, “Peter, please wash the dishes. James and John, put away the leftovers. Judas, get the beds made. Andrew, you’re on mopping duty, and the rest of you: go ask the women what else they need done. Oh, and in case you’re wondering: this work isn’t a prelude to the sacred. This work *is* the sacred.”

I wrestle with this story precisely because the implications are significant: if Jesus had taken a more radical stance in Martha’s house, would his followers have wasted the next two-thousand years arguing over “a woman’s rightful place” in the home and in the church? Would countless women

today feel so self-conscious, judged, and shamed over how well they do or don't juggle the competing demands of their domestic, professional, and religious lives? Maybe. But maybe not.

I do believe that Jesus championed women in some essential ways during his lifetime. But the fact remains that in this particular story, Martha's burdensome sense of obligation and duty has cultural roots which Jesus doesn't confront on her behalf. Her anxiety doesn't come from nowhere; she lives inside a social and religious system that fully expects her to behave as she does, and the power of that system is formidable. In other words, Martha needs systemic change in order to live into the permission Jesus tries to offer her. She can't embrace such radical freedom by herself; she needs those in power to embrace it with her and for her.

So I wonder: What would it be like for us contemporary Christians to examine the systems and structures that still bind "Marthas" today? What would it cost us to dismantle those systems? What would it look like to create concrete opportunities for the overburdened in our midst to rest? To sit freely at Jesus's feet? To find support, community, and help as they struggle to become disciples? What would it look like to stand in solidarity with your nearest Martha as she unlearns a lifetime's worth of messaging about what makes her soul lovable, valuable, honorable, and holy?

The bottom line is, it's ridiculous to champion contemplation over action. The mystic over the activist. Worship over service. We need both. Our common life *requires* both. How would the church survive without people like Martha? The ones who bake the eucharistic bread, tend the flower beds, restock the votive candles, and sew the pageant costumes? After all, isn't it fascinating that Mary and Martha are sisters? Their differences can't erase the basic fact that they belong together. They *need* each other. They hold each other in balance. Right? Isn't this, finally, a story about balance?

I don't think it is. I don't think Jesus's ringing endorsement of Mary's "choosing the better part" will disappear so easily. Because the story is *not* about balance. The story is about choosing the one thing, the *best* thing—and forsaking everything else for its sake. The story is about single-mindedness. About a passionate and undistracted pursuit of a single treasure. Think of Jesus's most evocative parables; they all point in this same direction: the pearl of great price. The buried treasure in the field. The lost sheep. The lost coin. The lost son. Christianity is not about balance; it's about extravagance. It's not about being reasonable; it's about being wildly, madly, and deeply in love with Jesus.

As soon as Jesus enters Martha's house, he turns the place upside down. He messes with Martha's expectations, routines, and habits. He insists on costly change. Perhaps Martha's mistake is that she assumes she can invite

Jesus into her life—and then carry on with that life as usual, maintaining control, privileging her own priorities, and clinging to her long-cherished agendas and schedules. What is Jesus's response to that assumption? No. Absolutely not. That's not how discipleship works.

In contrast, Mary recognizes that Jesus's presence in her house requires a radical shift in her priorities, plans, and postures. A surrender. Every action, decision, and priority has to be filtered through this new love, this new devotion, this new passion. Jesus is no ordinary guest. He is the guest who will be Host. The Host who will provide the bread of life, the living water, and the wine that is his own blood to anyone who will sit at his feet and receive his hospitality.

It's easy for us to lose sight of Mary. In our work-frenzied, performance-driven lives, it's easy to believe that pondering, listening, waiting, and resting have no value. In our age of snark and cynicism, it's easy to roll our eyes at spiritual earnestness. In a world that is profoundly broken and unjust, it's easy to argue that we should leave contemplation to the monastics and throw all of our time and energy into social engagement. To be clear: we *are* called to work for justice. We are called to bring liberty to the oppressed and comfort to the afflicted. But every "work" we do must begin, Jesus insists, from "only one thing." It must begin with him. It must begin at his feet.

Jesus doesn't call Martha out for her hospitality. It is not her cooking, cleaning, or serving that bothers him. Notice the actual problem he names: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

The root meaning of the word "worry" is "strangle," or "seize by the throat" and "tear." The root meaning of the word "distraction" is a dragging apart of something that should be whole. These are violent words. Words that wound and fracture. States of mind that render us incoherent, divided, and un-whole.

Jesus finds Martha in just such a state of fragmentation, a condition in which she cannot enjoy his company, savor his presence, find inspiration in her work, receive anything he wishes to offer her, or show him genuine love. Instead, all she can do is *question* his love ("Lord, do you not care?"), fixate on herself ("My sister has left me to do all the work by myself"), and triangulate ("Tell her then to help me").

Does any of this sound familiar? Is your inner life so strangled, so incoherent, that you struggle to give and receive love? Are you quick to seethe in the places you call home? Has your busyness become an affront to the people you long to host and to love? Is your worry keeping you from being present, engaged, and alive? Have you lost the ability to attend? To linger? Are you using your packed schedule to avoid intimacy with God or with others?

My answer to many of these questions is yes. If yours is yes, too, then I wonder if we can hear Jesus's words to Martha, not as a criticism, but as an invitation. Not as a rebuke, but as a soothing balm. Jesus knows that we ache to be whole. He knows that we place brutal and devastating expectations on ourselves. He knows that our resentments, like Martha's, are often borne of envy.

Martha longs to sit where Mary sits. She longs to take delight in Jesus's words. She longs to surrender her heavy burden and allow Jesus to host her. Maybe we long for these good things, too. Here's the good news: there is need of only one thing. If we choose it, no one will have the power to take it away from us; this is the Host's promise. So choose it.