

Sermon “More than a Mary or a Martha”

Kirk of St James

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There are a few stories in the Bible that put me on the defensive. The prodigal son is one, where the responsible older brother has to put up with his irresponsible little brother. As the older sibling who watched her younger siblings get away with things she was never allowed to there might have been some frustration on my part! The other is Mary and Martha, most likely because I identify more with Martha. I often think if I had been there that day and Jesus said that to me, while Mary sat there doing nothing, I would throw my apron on the floor and say, “fine, you two sort dinner out yourselves, I am out of here.” Then I would have marched myself straight out the door muttering about ungratefulness. However, to treat this passage that simply would be a grave injustice to the text. Part of the problem with this passage is interpretation, often it has been set up as lifting up one sisters actions at the denigration of the other. This is not a narrative about busyness versus contemplation, but rather a story of what sits at the heart of what we do and why we do it.

Martha’s impulse to hustle to the kitchen when a guest arrived at her door was not an unexpected response. Martha was continuing a long tradition of hospitality that stretched back to a moment in time when Abraham welcomed three strangers to a meal. In fact, it would have been inhospitable not to offer a meal. While she is in the kitchen, likely working in the heat, and trying to do everything herself, the resentment naturally begins to grow. Why is Mary out there listening, while I am in here doing everything myself? It is not difficult to imagine a moment here that likely many of recognize even in our modern world, where one person is in the kitchen closing things louder than they need to, and thumping things down on the counter to make a point. Finally Martha’s anger boils over, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” If this were a television show this is the moment we would pause on.

Here is where everything begins to unravel and interpretation can spread out in a myriad of ways. Some have argued based on this narrative that a life of contemplation is more valuable than a life of service. Some have used it to polarize the sister's and put their activities in opposition to each other. Others have treated the women like one-dimensional characters where each woman becomes a stereotype of their role. However, many of these interpretations fail to get at the heart of what is truly happening here. In my reading this week I came across biblical scholar Matthew Skinner from Luther Seminary in Minnesota. He helpfully breaks down some of the problems with this passage.

When Jesus praises Mary for having chosen “the better part” it is not about action versus listening and contemplation—he is talking about Mary’s focus on Jesus. “To be genuine, acts of discipleship—whether contemplative, active or anything else—need to maintain a focus.” We do these things because we are followers of Christ, and as such we are focused on Christ. It wasn’t Martha being busy in the kitchen, it was that she forgot about why she was doing it. It was no longer about hospitality or her friend Jesus, it was about something else entirely. This is something we still struggle with as a church today. How do we take the things we talk about in church, and put them to work in the world? When do things move beyond nice sentiments, to rolling up our sleeves and diving in? As one person said, “The struggle between word and deed, the speaker and the doer, the contemplative and the activist, will no doubt be with us until the end of time; and the complaint of the one about the other will undoubtedly recur in the future as frequently as it has in the past.”

How many times have we been skeptical about things we have started because we can be really good at talking about them and then dropped off and not put it into action? Just as any family, any work group, any friend group and even church knows—we need both types of people to make it work. We need people to dream and come up with ideas, and we need people who know how to put it into action. We have people who (okay I am not going to say love

going to meetings) but are willing to attend, and then there are people who say I don't want to go to a meeting, but if you want me to do something just ask.

Quite a few years ago now Tom Friedman had a column in the op-ed page of *The New York Times* called, "The Taxi Driver." In it he recalls taking a one-hour taxi ride during which six things happened. The driver drove the cab, took a phone call, and watched a video on his cellphone. Friedman had been the passenger, worked on a column on his laptop, and listened to his iPod. "There was only one thing we never did; talk to each other." Friedman went on to quote Linda Stone, a technologist, who had written that the disease of the internet age is "continuous partial inattention." Keeping in mind that that was written over fifteen years ago, how much more so is that true today?

In much the way it is possible for us to be distracted, it is equally possible for a church community to be incredibly busy rushing from groups, and activities and programs, but losing sight of why they do it. It is a duty, or it is expected, or it is simply "what we do." But it has lost the heart of why. Suddenly the food bank volunteer hours, or the hot lunch program, transitions from a way they show love in their community, to something on a check list. It is easy for both ourselves and our churches to be busy, but not for the right reasons. It is one of the things that came up with the New Beginnings programs, we decided we wanted to be intentional in what we do. Not simply throw events and programs together because "we should" but because we care and see them as ways to extend God's love in the community and put our faith into action. It is also one of the reasons the congregational care committee wanted to put the connection cards in the pews, because wrapping our arms around the congregation and trying to meet the needs of people is incredibly important to us—we love this congregation and we want to find ways to better care for people and serve them.

It is challenging as individuals and as a church to tread the line between action and contemplation, but please know and be encouraged that whatever your gifts, they are important. Whether you are a Mary or a Martha, God calls us all. It is our focus on God that is important in

whatever ways we serve. The body of Christ is made up of many different parts, and all are important.

One other interesting point in regards to this passage is Jesus' acceptance of Mary assuming the role of a student sitting at the feet of their teacher. This passage pushed the boundaries of expectations, and the role of both men and women in the kingdom of God. Typically in the ancient world the public room was where the men would meet, and the kitchen and other unseen places were where women belonged. Mary, by taking the place of where a student would sit to learn from a teacher, and Jesus' affirmation of it, if by no other means than by his acceptance of her presence, demonstrated that woman also have an active role to play in the Kingdom. Mary was proof, that when women hear Jesus speaking about the Kingdom, that God is calling them to listen so that they can share it too.

While on the surface this narrative appears simple, to dive into it and consider it in its entirety shows us a world of meaning. As N.T Wright said, "Action and contemplation are of course both important. Without the first you wouldn't eat, and without the second you wouldn't worship." As a church we need both, the important thing is that we remember why we do these things. We do them because we are followers of Christ, and that should always be our focus. "This same Lord calls us to focus on him when we gather on Sunday, to move from our place of being worried and distracted by many things to one where we are in touch with the one thing needed, the good part that will not be taken away. There we will connect with the source that bring both peace and energy to all our undertakings." May God bless our gifts and the ways each of works in the world that we might better share the love and hope found in the kingdom of God.