

“A Man had Two Daughters...”
6th Sunday after Pentecost – July 17, 2022 – Luke 10:38-42/C

At a time when women’s choice is in the headlines every day, it is curiously fitting to know that some of the issues that continue to plague our modern society were present centuries ago. While our traditional family structures might seem similar, the cultural norms of Jesus’ time were completely different. Choices for women throughout history in the world have long been limited to roles and situation that were rarely chosen nor authored by their hand, but created and directed for them by others. So it is important to remember that even Bible stories connect to our situations with a sort of “timelessness.” Today we have just heard an unusual story from Luke that- unlike so many others which begin “A Man had Two Sons” – might have opened up with the verse, “A Woman had Two Daughters...”

As strange as that titling may sound, today we have arrived at the home of Martha – yet even as that fact of Martha’s primacy *begins* the story, we still know it from past visits as the story of *Mary and Martha* (Martha having second billing) – or from John’s telling, *Lazarus and His Sisters, who lived in Bethany*. “Sigh.”

So let’s take a closer look as we go back in time to Jesus’ day...where some things never change but where some things might just transform the world, when Jesus is around. This story has been used as a blueprint for Christian women for centuries. But if you look at it closely – along with most of the New Testament – you will realize that Jesus did not come to pick out the perfect models for our lives of faith. Oh, there were moments, for sure, when Jesus was moved, or delighted, or downright amazed at the faith that was growing all around him: “Woman, great is your faith! Your faith has made you well; I have not found so great a faith; and your faith has saved you...”

No story in the Bible has just one layer – their meanings change as your ears age and your experiences connect or not to the passage – that’s the work of inspiration and the Holy Spirit – and it is why we continue to read and reread, hear and re-hear the words of Jesus in repetitive cycles and seasons. In this way, as we come to these amazing and ancient stories, we look at as many layers as we can. For example, we begin with the root story of Jesus, Martha and Mary in about 30 AD. After that, we look at that story as it is being told by the Gospel writer, Luke, as he brings the story to life *for his particular audience* in around 85 AD. His task was never to tell a story verbatim, but to take a tale that was already well known and interpret for another generation after the original characters lived and died, much as the preacher makes connections between these folks then and you folks now.

So let’s start with the point that Luke, the storyteller is making. What might he be saying to that 1st century community of Christians as they make their first attempts at being church? Well, it might be to model, “*How to Be a Female Follower of Jesus*.” Do you think he might have put it right after the Good Samaritan story for a reason? There, Luke was redefining “neighborhood” for those who were now interacting with Gentiles and foreigners, and trying to figure out who they were supposed to be showing mercy towards. So this might be a peek at the changing women’s roles at that time, in that community. A redefinition, using the character of Martha as the host. She was now in charge of hospitality, and she was a new paradigm for leaders. Women had taken on new responsibilities, new importance, and like Martha, they were doing it with such energy that the apostle Paul had to help curb their enthusiasm by suggesting that they “keep silent in church.” But the ladies had already

tasted the wine and began the rush to open doors and shatter their version of glass ceilings overhead! And Jesus would not have dismissed them, nor Martha's efforts...but would have praised her labor of love and savored the meal. But perhaps those new labors of love had become a cry of pain, the birthpangs of change, as it were. So Luke has Martha come out to Jesus to complain...her tasks had overwhelmed her and she had already struck out in anger at the sister she loved.

But, hey, why was he sharing just with Mary? And why wasn't **HE** in the kitchen - after all, he'd just fed 5000 folks with just two ingredients...his grilled fish was to die for and he could divide a loaf in a way that saved people's lives. So perhaps the ladies of Luke's community, as well as their heroine, Martha, were entertaining a tiny thought as they worked: "*Why am I doing this all alone?*" And Jesus might ask, "*Why indeed?*"

Which focuses us back on the text - not to see what it tells us about us, but what it reveals about God - enfleshed in human form as the Son, Jesus. What do Jesus' actions teach us? What is this story telling us about God - if we look at it from GOD'S POINT OF VIEW? What does God want us to know about how we might live when we know we are valued, chosen and called?

For these two sisters, it was to find their place in a male-dominated society, and embody their individual calling out of their gifts in an unprecedented social situation. For Martha, it was the good fortune to oversee the very essence of a Jewish home - through hospitality offered traditionally by the host - the head of the household, the head of the family. Martha may have simply gotten a little bit too comfortable at being the center of things, and pushed back when she was losing the spotlight.

For Mary it was taking advantage of the changing role which she chose for herself BECAUSE Martha was so effective, so accomplished, so natural at taking charge - which allowed Mary the opportunity to be her best self and focus on the learning that previously would have only have come from her father, or a husband - but most certainly not offered in the educational system of the local synagogue. Today was the day she got to sit right in the front row of the Rabbi's class, and she obviously made the most of this chance.

I do love the Greek words of this story - particularly, in v. 40 "*Martha was distracted by her many tasks.*" The Greek word means literally, to be pulled in all directions (*peri-spai-omai*.) Been there...

But then Jesus responds "*you are worried, and distracted by many things*" read "afraid of misfortunes from which she must protect her own interests" (*mer im na o*) and another Greek word for distracted this time, (*thor u baz o*) for a loud commotion that causes confusion. Martha has worked herself into a frenzy by **trying too hard!**

Now, you don't have to know much Bible, to know that getting between sisters is hardly ever a good idea. Sisters have a mysterious bond that makes them competitive, loving and protective all at the same time. Sisters can fight like cats with claws bared; and moments later curl up together to read a book or share a piece of gossip. Martha and Mary were no different, and Jesus took a risk coming between them. And while I used to be troubled by Jesus showing some pretty blatant favoritism between two sisters - I mean, what guest would have openly chosen one sister's behavior over the other's? Yet, we know that Jesus often did surprising things and acted in unorthodox ways - which is why I can see that Jesus was not demeaning Martha, but inviting her to let her frenzy diminish by relaxing and being present with everyone else who might be enjoying the evening.

Now, rather than seeing Mary as choosing the easy role and Martha being obligated to the difficult task, would it be impossible to imagine that Mary might have already been a disciple of Jesus? That she might have been traveling with Jesus and the 12, and had just now returned to her family home in Bethany? A different point of view? Could that explain Jesus' invitation to not worry so much about the food, but to be nourished in the presence of her sister and her Lord for this brief moment of homecoming?

In Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, instead of indicating (v.42) that "Mary has chosen the better part," Jesus' words are "Mary has chosen the main course..." Indeed, Jesus will be the main course at their table, and at ours.

In a way, this is a very simple story, an introduction to Mary and Martha, and we should not judge them on this one scene alone, but should also turn to John's Gospel: Where Martha (the distracted hostess) has found herself – and wouldn't it be nice to imagine that transformation beginning when she sets down her spoons and comes to join the others - so that, at the tomb of her brother Lazarus, she is able to confess her faith in Jesus by saying, "*You are the Messiah, the One coming into the world.*" And where Mary (the unhelpful listener) is moved to take action - perhaps knowing that being a student and follower of Jesus has already changed her life – so that at a dinner to celebrate Lazarus' being raised from the dead, she pours expensive oil on Jesus' head, anoints him for his burial to come, and in so doing acts out that very same confession of faith. The sisters were listening. They were BOTH listening.

So, how does God come to us? Where will you see God today? Will you have time for a good, long talk? Remember, Jesus isn't stopping by to be fed by you, he's stopping by to feed you; to share a vision of a better world, in which you have been given a part. How will you play that part? Well, in today, you just look at Jesus: the one at whose feet we are sitting, who will soon be washing our feet.

So, what would have happened if Martha had done ***no*** serving at all? Answer: People would have started to get hungry. And then, perhaps, for his beloved Mary and no-less beloved Martha ...Jesus would have headed for the kitchen, found the bread and broken it—and you know the rest.* Amen.

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**Resources: "Poor Martha" - [Garret Keizer](#) (7.4.01 Xn Century)*