

**A Tale of Two Sisters:  
Mary and Martha**  
Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

“This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Note that the psalmist did not say this, “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us put on our work boots and build a house in Kentucky.” Or this, “Let us put on our work gloves and hoe the community garden.”

This tale of two sisters, Mary and Martha, recorded only by Luke, creates tension for me because I’m more like Martha than Mary. I’m wired to put on work boots and gloves and do, like Martha, who was busy preparing a meal for Jesus. But in this incident, Jesus did not commend Martha for her doing; he commended Mary, the one who sat at the feet of Jesus.

Is this incident telling us that listening, being still, and introspection are more important than hammering, hoeing, and building?

Well, it’s complicated, as they say today. Some theologians say this tale of two sisters is one part of a package. The other part is the parable Jesus tells just before this, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Some describe the two parts of this package as theological yin and yang, the Chinese concept of balance. Dark needs light. Evil needs good. The “go and do likewise” of the good Samaritan needs the sit down and listen of Mary.

Thomas Merton, whose writings on spirituality have been meaningful to many, got it right, “Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance, order, rhythm, and harmony.”

The Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches the importance of devotion to people in need, even strangers on the side of the road. The

tale of two sisters teaches the importance of devotion to the Lord's teaching. The good Samaritan exemplifies the value of seeing and responding. Mary exemplifies the value of listening and being still. The good Samaritan teaches "love your neighbor." Mary teaches "love the words of the Lord." The good Samaritan and Mary both represent marginalized persons, unlikely heroes: one a despised Samaritan and the other a lowly woman. Yet both are held up as model disciples. Together these two stories present a balanced picture of Christian faith: at times doing, simply seeing a need and responding, and at times being, simply sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening. But both are necessary for a balanced Christian faith.

I bet you can guess who answered the door the day Jesus visited the house of Mary and Martha. Of course, it was Martha. She was probably already up doing something, so she greeted Jesus at the door. During the course of Jesus' visit, Luke notes that Martha became "*distracted* by her many tasks." Notice her busyness is described as a distraction. I can picture Martha chopping vegetables, cooking, pouring water for her guests, straightening things. That was the traditional role of a woman in her day. She was taking care of the domestic duties of home. But Luke calls those duties a distraction. On that day, they should not have been her primary concern.

Martha's sister, Mary, on the other hand, "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." We may not even notice this today, but that was a provocative action by Mary. It was bold of Mary, a woman, to sit at the feet of a teacher, for that was a role reserved for male students. According to custom, Mary really should have been helping Martha prepare the meal. This is an ancient teaching from the rabbis:

*Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst...[but] talk not much with womankind. (New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, p. 231)*

By sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary was stepping outside the boundaries and assuming the role of a male disciple. And guess what? Jesus encouraged it.

Let me put the brakes on here for a moment. I want to say something to our women and girls. You are going to meet forces, especially in the church but also in the workplace and in society in general, that are going to try to force you into a gender stereotypical roles. “Go wash the dishes, honey.” “Run take care of the baby, sugar pie.” “We need some more coffee, dear.” “Why, you can’t be a preacher of the gospel, darlin’.” When that happens to you, I want you to remember Mary. Remember Mary’s provocative action here, assuming the role of a male disciple, and the one who empowered her to do so—Jesus.

So Martha complained: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

I understand that. Everyone who has worked in the kitchen while others sit around and talk understands that. One of the traditions at my house is a big meal on Monday nights. I’m off on Mondays, so I always cook a meal for the whole family, now including our first grandchild. I love doing it. I love planning it, harvesting or buying the food, prepping it, cooking it, and eating it. You know what, though? Nobody likes cleaning it up! It’s just one of those things that has to be done, and it sure is easier when everyone pitches in to help.

Lord, it’s not fair, Martha said. I’m getting no help from *my sister*. Please tell *her* to help me.

Notice Martha never called Mary by name. She called her “my sister” and told Jesus to tell “her” to help. Martha was so frustrated and angry that she was beginning to see her sister as a thing rather than as a person.

Jesus called Martha by name, affirming her personhood, and cautioned her about her priorities. Then he said these important words: “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.”

Jesus then called Mary by name, restoring her personhood, and affirmed her provocative action as a disciple of Jesus, regardless of gender.

Martha chose to prepare a meal, which is not a bad thing. Somebody has to do that, right? Somebody has to go into the hot kitchen and cook so everyone else can eat. Martha chose to cook. Mary chose “the Chosen One.” Which was more important? On that day at that time in that particular house, it was more important to “be” than to “do.” The opportunities to sit at the feet of Jesus and absorb his teachings were coming to an end, and Jesus told Martha that Mary had made the better choice.

So this package, this theological yin and yang, affirms balance. Our faith is indeed about finding wounded people on the side of the road and helping them. We must never pass by on the other side. Our faith also is about finding space to be with Jesus in prayer, study, worship, walks through nature, and all the other ways that deepen us.

According to a traditional Jewish tale, Rabbi Levi saw a man running in the street. “Why do you run?” Rabbi Levi asked the man.

“I am running after my good fortune!” the exhausted man replied.

Rabbi Levi told him, “Silly man, your good fortune has been trying to chase you, but you are running too fast.” (Muller, *Sabbath*, p. 48)

This is the day that the Lord has made. So let us slow down. Let us sloooow down and rejoice and be glad in it.

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, teach us to be still and to listen. Like you did with Mary, form us to be faithful disciples. Amen.