

Pentecost6-2019-The Better Way

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Luke 10:38-42

The Better Way

Jesus and his disciples are still heading toward Jerusalem. They enter a certain village, it could be anywhere; the place doesn't matter. "A woman named Martha welcomed Jesus into her home."

"She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." Suddenly we have siblings, comparisons and the potential for jealousy. The Bible is filled with siblings who have trouble getting along. We have Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, Joseph and his brothers and of course, Cain and Abel. Do we add Martha and Mary to the list?

The tension in the story escalates as we discover that Martha and Mary have chosen to do different things in relation to Jesus. The sisters have different interests, different ways of expressing love and a different philosophy on priorities. Which of them is right? Who will Jesus love the most? Are you thinking Jesus likes Mary more because she sits at his feet and listens to him? Maybe Jesus feels himself in rivalry with all the hosting tasks that Martha feels compelled to do. Is Jesus in rivalry with anyone or anything? Does he need Martha's attention to know that he is whole, complete, and loved? I don't think so. His sense of himself is secure and rests on his connection with his Abba, his father from whom he has come. Maybe he is O. K. with Martha being in the kitchen if that is where she wants to be.

But apparently she wasn't content there and doing what she wants to do in her freedom. The text says, "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks." Martha gets sidetracked by all the things she has to do. Overwhelmed and fragmented by the demands she is placing on herself she appears to have lost her center. She is like the story of Peter walking on water who, the minute he takes his eyes off Jesus discovers himself sinking into chaos.

So Martha has "lost it" in the kitchen. She has allowed herself to take on more than she can handle, been unrealistic about her limits, and miss-accessed what Jesus really wants for her. Does Jesus really want her to be frantic and upset; her blood pressure rising? No, he wants her calm, centered and working in the kitchen or listening at his feet; whichever is her preference. Is there any way Martha could have hosted her guest and still kept her focus? After all, both she and her sister are serving their Lord—she by doing, her sister by learning. Both ways are honorable. What's wrong with this picture?

In the midst of Martha's agitation she realizes she is upset with Mary because she thinks Mary is not doing her part. So where is Martha's focus? Is it on serving Jesus? Is it on hosting in a gracious way? No, it's on her sister. Martha is distracted by her awareness of what Mary is doing and not doing. That's Martha's Mistake. She has made Mary the center of her attention and there is no room for Jesus.

Martha, in her out-of-touch-with-herself condition, thinks that Jesus will see this situation the way she does. And, well, if he doesn't he should! She tries to triangle in Jesus against her sister and assumes he will agree that Mary is shirking her duty. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" Apparently Jesus should feel guilty for not having sensed Martha's need and sent Mary to the kitchen earlier. "Tell her then to help me," Martha says.

But Jesus doesn't see it the way Martha does and gently chides Martha, repeating her name twice. "Martha, Martha," he says. That Jesus uses her name twice moves me. It shows me that he cares about Martha as much as he cares about Mary. Jesus uses his kindest voice. I know when I am preoccupied I find it difficult to listen? I go into a kind of trance and a transparent and somewhat soundproof wall goes up around me. It takes someone speaking my name the first time just to break the barrier and a second time to convey the speaker's gentle intention to help me.

Jesus shows his love by giving her accurate feedback on the state of her soul. Martha, "You are worried and distracted by many things." Many voices are sounding off in Martha's head at once and they don't agree with one another. She is like Legion, the man with many demons. Worries cause her to live in the realm of her own fears though they are often unfounded. Her distraction takes her away from what is important and fixates her on things that don't really matter. So Martha finds herself scattered, afraid of missing something, and out of control. She feels separate, alone and anxious. She hates being at odds with her sister.

Jesus' gentle voice speaks again. Martha, "There is need of only one thing." The words "one thing" stands out to me. Martha is listening to many voices and they contradict each other but Jesus says there is need of only one thing. "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Mary will grow from what she has taken in but Martha will be diminished due her resentment—her soul shrunk by a degree. He says it so gently, soothing the flaming anger Martha feels for Mary.

What has Mary done differently? Mary has focused on Jesus instead of her sister. She has learned that the way away from rivalry, jealousy, and conflict; sibling and otherwise, is to make Jesus the center and learn from him. Listen to Jesus, do what he does, act like he acts and love like he loves. This focus pulls us out of our tangles with our neighbor, even tangles in our

family, even those closest to us. It's not that Mary is better than Martha or contemplation better than service. It's that Mary has focused her life on following the One who leads her away from entangling traps of rivalry and jealousy. Her focus has shifted from the horizontal to the vertical.

I want to briefly shift to the Colossians passage that was written as a song sung by early Christians as they reminded themselves that they didn't follow "God's Son, Caesar," who was just another human like themselves, albeit vested with terrifying power that he used often and savagely. No, they followed Jesus, Son of the invisible God, who showed them the face of God and focused their gaze vertically instead of horizontally. It was a huge idea with cosmic dimensions. To quote Brian McClaren, "Paul is saying, our faith in the way of Jesus isn't a tiny religion in the Roman Empire; the whole Empire is a dirty little neighborhood within the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ." He is turning everything on its head, which is what Jesus does.

I want now to read Colossians 1:15-20. I find it to be one of the most powerful and beautiful passages in the New Testament:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Focusing on Jesus is the only thing we really need to find ourselves living on the inside of who God is and what God wants. It's the better way. Amen.