

# Martha & Mary: Finding Balance

(Balancing active service with spiritual contemplation.)

*Luke 10:38-42*

*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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This morning we're going to focus on the importance of **finding proper balance in life**. When you think about it, in one way or another balance plays a huge role in many different aspects of life. For instance, how good is your physical balance? If you've ever struggled with foot, ankle, knee, hip, back, vision, or inner-ear problems, you are keenly aware of issues with balance – and how difficult it can be at times to be out of balance.

The science of physics teaches us that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction – a way to keep the universe in balance. Nature also has a way of finding balance. This is especially true in keeping populations of animal species in check. Speaking of keeping things in check, the three branches of our federal government were devised as a system of checks and balances. (At least they used to work that way.)

Life is all about balance. This applies to our individual lives in other ways as well. In fact, **keeping things in your life in balance can be one of the most important ways to lead a healthy and fulfilling life**.

Nutritionists remind us of this constantly. How often have we heard how important it is to eat a balanced diet? Health experts also remind us not only to eat right in order to keep our bodies and minds in balance, but that we also need to get enough exercise and enough sleep. And most of us have experienced the negative affects of failing to balance the time we spend working with times of leisure and relaxation.

When we get out of balance, we feel it. And yes, it affects more than just our physical health. We are finally realizing that **there is indeed a profound interconnectedness between the proper balance of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being**.

Think of a mobile that hangs over a baby's crib. Remove one of the pieces and the entire mobile goes crazy. It then scrambles to find new balance. The same is true with our lives. When either our physical, emotional, or spiritual balance gets out of sync, our entire being is affected. This, in turn, usually ends up affecting those closest to us.

This can be true of institutions, as well, including the church – whether it's the church universal, our own denomination, or this very congregation. It can occur for any number of reasons, like when there are unresolved personality issues, struggles for power and control, or when one area of ministry is overemphasized to the detriment of other areas of ministry.

Well, in case you're wondering, all of this talk about being in and out of balance has direct implications and applications to today's Gospel Lesson from Luke 10. This

fairly familiar story of two sisters, Martha and Mary, has come to represent, in the very capable hands of the literary biblical author, a tale about finding proper balance.

But before we get into this story let me ask you right off the bat – **are you a Martha or a Mary?** Let me explain. **One of the most common ways to interpret this passage is to see Mary and Martha as archetypes – representing the two sides of the same coin of faithful Christian discipleship.**

Martha, who is exhausted and exasperated with all her many tasks, represents the side of life and ministry that focuses on service – taking action to help others and keep things running. It's no coincidence that she is an extension of the story that immediately precedes this one in Luke – the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we looked at a couple of Sundays ago.

As you may remember, the telling of that parable is set up by an expert in the Law of Moses asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus replies with a question, "What is written in the Scriptures?" The lawyer knows the correct answer, which comes in two parts, "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.**"

When the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus proceeds to give an example of how to fulfill the second part, to 'love your neighbor as yourself'. The parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that in order to be a true neighbor we must not pass by on the other side when we encounter someone in need. We learn that a crucial part of being a Christian involves reaching out and serving others. Jesus tells the lawyer, and us, to "go and do" likewise. **This is the active service side of the equation of what is required of us as disciples of Jesus. That is what Martha represents.**

Luke then immediately presents the story of Martha and Mary, which demonstrates the other side of the discipleship equation by giving an example of what it means to fulfill the first part, 'love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind'. Luke, using the teachings of Jesus, is instructing us that **faithful discipleship is more than just serving and ministering to others. It's also about pausing and listening and learning from Jesus himself – the living Word of God.**

This story of Mary and Martha reminds us that **if we don't pause long enough to be renewed, reenergized and empowered spiritually, then we get out of balance,** which usually takes the form of burnout, irritability, and strained relationships. Martha's complaint to Jesus, basically ordering him to tell Mary to get up and help her, is a classic indication of **burnout** – and its ever-present companion, **resentment.**

It's also a classic case of what psychologists call **triangulation.** Did you notice that in order to deal with her anxiety, Martha goes to Jesus to complain, instead of directly approaching Mary, the one with whom she has the problem? Jesus has been triangulated by Martha into her issues with Mary.

In an effort to avoid direct confrontations, we also do this in our personal relationships, and at work or at school. Church members and congregations also fall into this trap.

Concerning the specific issue at hand in this biblical text, it is indeed true that we often become resentful of those persons whom we perceive as not pulling their own weight when it comes to the many necessary tasks at hand. Again, that can be applied to tasks involved in managing a household, or at our place of work, or with running the church and participating in active ministry efforts. We, like Martha, can end up being heard saying, "Lord, do you not care that these other folks have left me to do

all the work by myself? Tell them to help me." But in order to avoid the trap of triangulation, perhaps we need to ask them ourselves!

**Before we dismiss Martha as simply a whiner, however, let us remember again the parable of the Good Samaritan, and our calling to active service and acts of ministry – regardless of what others do or do not do.** But let's face it, the church can't run itself. Nothing would ever get done if there weren't a large contingent of "Marthas" here at College Hill, and in this Presbytery, to help do the work.

Studies have shown that a majority of Presbyterians, by nature, tend to have a strong sense of duty and responsibility (the old Protestant work ethic). Therefore, **we tend to be more like the ever-busy Martha than the contemplative Mary.** Yet Jesus' response to Martha is very informative. He teaches that if we become so engrossed with constant work and activity, then all that hard work can actually become a distraction. And what is it that we are ultimately distracted from? In this story, it is being distracted from sitting at the feet of Jesus, the position of a disciple, in order to listen and learn from him. Jesus, in fact, calls this "the better part".

One biblical commentator confirms, "One doesn't have to look far to see that our churches are filled with far more folks like Martha than Mary." And those of us who are social justice advocate types often complain that too many other Christians spend too much time with their noses stuck in the Bible and not out in active ministry. Jesus teaches us that the converse also applies – **too many of us spend so much of our time putting our faith into action that we neglect to reflect upon the word and presence of God in our lives – the contemplative side to our faith development that provides the foundation for our service.**

So for instance, coming to worship is an extremely important part of the 'Mary' side of the equation. So is participating in Christian Education. But this once-a-week experience may not be enough. So let me ask you: **What spiritual disciplines, in addition to serving and caring for others, do you engage in during the week? What do you do to feed your spirit? Is your discipleship in balance?**

Martha and Mary are indeed two sides of the same coin of faithful discipleship. Today's biblical lesson informs us that if our coin turns up too often on the Martha side then our spiritual life is out of balance. Therefore, our challenge is this: What can you and I do so that the Mary side of the coin turns up an equal number of times?

Let me reiterate, however, that Luke's story is not a condemnation of service and activity. It makes the point, however, that **if our activity and ministry is to be wise and fruitful and, most importantly, grounded in God, then there must also be times of stillness, prayer, learning, and being in touch with our own inner world.**

Perhaps, then, we need to take more seriously the simple instruction found in Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God."

So let us all work hard to get our discipleship, both our Martha and Mary sides of faithful Christian growth, in balance – for the good of your own personal journey of faith, and for the good of the life and ministry of this congregation and Presbytery. Let me close with this thought:

*There is a time to go and do.  
There is a time to listen and reflect.  
Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment.*

Amen.