

Contemplation & Service: Finding Balance

The Story of Martha & Mary

Luke 10:38-42
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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One of the side effects of being deeply involved and passionate about something is that such intense concentration can leave you emotionally, spiritually, and sometimes even physically drained. That's the condition many of us find ourselves in after following the one-after-another horrific events over the past several weeks.

Last Sunday I addressed some issues connected with the shootings by police and the shooting of police. I shared, for instance, my ongoing Facebook discussion of the difference between Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter. I stoked the flames a bit a couple of days ago when I posted a meme stating, "When the war on Christmas starts... We should all answer 'Merry Christmas!' with 'All holidays matter!'" It makes the point.

This past week, while the nation was still mourning the events of the previous week we witness the unthinkable plowing down of revelers in Nice, France, followed the next day by an attempted coup to overthrow the president of Turkey.

As people of faith, how do we respond to all this insanity? One way is to learn as much as possible about such events and then either take some kind of action or deeply reflect upon their implications. But as we know, it's not really either/or but both/and.

We are indeed called to **action**, perhaps in the form of attending a prayer vigil, a community discussion, a march, or writing a letter, or connecting with others on social media, etc. **But what do we do when we find ourselves drained of energy?** Finding a place to hide in is one tempting solution, but not very practical. So I can't think of a better scripture passage to provide us with some necessary guidance than **the story of Martha and Mary**. One of the most common ways to interpret this seemingly simple story from Luke 10 is to see Martha and Mary as **archetypes** – representing the two sides of the same coin of faithful Christian discipleship.

Martha, who becomes exhausted and exasperated with all her many tasks, has been personified as the side of life and ministry that focuses on service and hospitality – the person who takes action, gets involved, helps others, keeps busy and works hard.

Martha-types are the activists and the worker bees, focusing on the outward and external expression of a life of faith. I suspect a majority of you who attend College Hill can easily relate to Martha and her life of active service.

Mary, on the other hand, who sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to him while he teaches, has been personified as the side of life and ministry that focuses on learning and contemplation – the one who studies the teachings of Jesus and the words of scripture, taking time to pause, reflect and pray. **Mary-types are those who focus on the inward and internal expression of a life of faith.** Giving attention to our internal spiritual life has been a particular emphasis of mine here at the church, especially in the past couple of years.

In the story, when Martha complains to Jesus and tells him to make Mary get up and help her, Jesus responds, "Martha, Martha, 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" (Luke 10:41). This story has often been used, therefore, to claim that inward spiritual development is more important than outward service to others. Or to put it another way, that "doing" is not as important as "being." Would you agree with that interpretation? Well if taken by itself, that is what this story seems to imply. But is that what Jesus is really saying, that reflective learning is better than active service?

For years I've been preaching a both/and approach to a life of faith, rather than an either/or approach. In line with that philosophy I've entitled this sermon, "Contemplation & Service: Finding Balance." Doesn't this story imply, however, that it's service or contemplation? I suggest the answer to that is no, and this is why. It has everything to do with where Luke places this story within his gospel. For that, we need to know what precedes it in Luke 10.

The middle part of this chapter is what we looked at last Sunday, the famous Parable of the Good Samaritan. What at first may seem like two completely unrelated stories actually have a lot to say when looked at *together*. In fact, biblical commentator Brian Stoffregen states, "The Martha and Mary text should not be studied separate from the lawyer's question and the parable of the Good Samaritan that precedes it."

As we will see, the Samaritan who cares and helps, and Mary who listens and learns, are simply ways to illustrate the two-part answer that the lawyer gives to his own question about inheriting eternal life. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). This is the lens through which these two stories must be interpreted together.

When the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus proceeds to give the example of how to fulfill the second part, to 'love your neighbor as yourself,' through the parable of the Good Samaritan. Luke then immediately presents the story of Martha and Mary, and as an extension Martha represents this element of active service through her hospitality. But Luke cleverly goes on to demonstrate the other side of the discipleship coin by then giving an example of what it means to fulfill the first part, 'love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind'. Using the teachings of Jesus, Luke instructs us that faithful discipleship is *more* than just serving and ministering to others. It's also about pausing from our busyness in order to listen and learn 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, centered and grounded spiritually, then we and our activity get out of balance. We need to be reminded that **activism without contemplation can end in aimless "doing" that can actually aggravate existing difficulties**. Biblical commentator Cynthia A. Jarvis adds a warning about how this can eventually affect the life of a congregation. She writes:

A church that has been led to be "worried and distracted by many things" (v. 41) inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shallows of frantic potlucks, anxious stewardship campaigns, and events designed simply to perpetuate the institution. Decisions will be made in meetings without a hint of God's reign. Food and drink will appear at table without Christ being recognized in the breaking of bread. Social issues may be addressed, but the gospel is missed in acts that partake of politics as usual...

On the other hand, when a congregation is led to position itself at Christ's feet – reading Scripture together and asking after its meaning, listening to substantive sermons and wrestling like Jacob for God's blessings, studying and nurturing a faith that seeks understanding – then even the details of the common life begin to resound with good news.

Whenever we neglect to keep our life in balance, we often find that we experience, much like Martha in this story, burnout, irritability, and strained relationships born out of resentment. 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. That can be applied to tasks involved in managing a household, or at our place of work, within volunteer organizations, 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."

Before we dismiss Martha simply as 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. And 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 to help do the necessary work. So thank you for all the time and talents and resources you have contributed! Studies have shown, in fact, that a majority of Presbyterians, by temperament type, tend to have a strong sense of duty and responsibility (that's the old Protestant work ethic). Therefore, almost by nature, **we often 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 a source of anxiety. 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. It's being distracted from getting well-grounded spiritually in our purpose before engaging in all our service.

So what do you do to feed and nurture your spirit and to center your life? Is your discipleship in balance? Does the Mary side of the coin of faithful discipleship turn up as much as the Martha side? Do you practice the instruction in Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God"?

Let me close with a thought that reflects what we learn from these two stories, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the tale of Martha and Mary:

***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.***

May God bless us in our spiritual discernment and our efforts to find balance. So for yourself, is it Martha-time or Mary-time?

Amen.

Resources: *Feasting on the Word*
Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes as CrossMarks.com