

# Contemplation and Service: Finding Balance

## The Story of Martha & Mary

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

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Last Sunday's sermon focused on the overly-familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan. The intent was to look deeper than the common take-away interpretation. Therefore, we explored an alternative deeper meaning than when we just put ourselves into the role of the Samaritan, with the take-away being "everyone is my neighbor and we should benevolently extend mercy and compassion to all people, especially to those in need." We put ourselves into the role of the injured person on the side of the road, the one in a position of social privilege, being helped by a "cultural enemy", like the Samaritan was to the Jewish person. That helped us realize that sometimes there are things we can learn from those we consider to be our cultural enemies.

Today's **story of Martha and Mary**, which immediately follows that parable, has a similar issue when comes to an all-to-common take away. But let's start there. After hearing this story from Luke 10 **what is your immediate take-away interpretation? For many, it's to reflect upon whether you are a Martha, or you are a Mary. Which of the two did you, do you, seem to relate to the most?** One of the most common ways to interpret this apparently simple story is to **see Martha and Mary as archetypes – representing the two sides of the same coin of faithful Christian discipleship – doing and being.**

**Martha**, who becomes worried, distracted, and apparently resentful because of all her busyness and many tasks, has been personified as the side of life and ministry that **focuses on service** – the person who plans, organizes, takes action, gets involved, helps others, keeps busy, and works hard. Marthas, whether female or male, are the activists and the worker bees, focusing on the **outward development and fulfillment of a life of faith.**

**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 person who studies the teachings of Jesus and the words of scripture, taking time to pause, reflect, meditate and pray. Marys, whether female or male, are those who are often called the spiritual ones, focusing on the **inward development and fulfillment of a life of faith.**

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 takes precedence over outward service to

others. But is that what Jesus is really saying? Is learning and reflective contemplation greater than active service, as expressed in this story by providing and extending welcoming hospitality?

For years I've been preaching a **both/and approach to a life of faith, rather than a binary either/or perspective**. In connection with that philosophy, I've even entitled this sermon, "Contemplation and Service: Finding Balancing". However, given the plain reading of this text by itself, doesn't it imply that it's service or contemplation? I suggest the answer to that is no, and this is why.

A proper interpretation of this story has everything to do with where Luke places this story within his gospel. For that, we need to know what precedes this story in Luke 10. As I previously mentioned, it's the Parable of the Good Samaritan. What at first may seem like two completely unrelated stories, surprisingly have a lot to say when looked at *together*. In fact, many biblical commentators today believe the Martha and Mary story should not be studied apart from the lawyer's question that sets up the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The Samaritan, who is moved to action, and Mary, who listens and learns, are simply ways to illustrate the answer that the lawyer gives to his own question about inheriting eternal life. The answer comes in two parts. The first part: "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." The second part: "and you shall love 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 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 – even if that person is perceived as our cultural enemy. Jesus tells the lawyer, and us, to "go and do" likewise. **This is the active service side of the coin of what is required of us as disciples of Jesus.**

Luke then immediately presents the story of Martha and Mary. As an extension, Martha also represents the element of active service through her hospitality. But **Luke cleverly goes on to demonstrate the other side of the discipleship equation 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, the gospel writer Luke instructs us that faithful discipleship is *more* than serving and ministering to others, as important as that is. **Faithful discipleship is also about pausing from our busyness in order to listen and learn from Jesus himself** – the living Word of God, the Word of God made flesh, the visible image of the invisible God. This story of Martha and Mary reminds us that if we don't pause long enough to be renewed, reenergized, and centered spiritually, then we and all our service and activity get out of balance. We need to be reminded that **activism without contemplation can end in aimless "doing" that can aggravate existing difficulties.**

Whenever we don't keep our life in balance, we often find that we experience, much like Martha in this story, burnout, irritability, and strained relationships borne 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 within a family managing a household, or at our place of work or school, within volunteer organizations, and yes, with functioning as the church, like volunteering in the work of one or more of our ministry teams. We, like Martha, can almost 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 compassionate service and other acts of ministry – regardless of what others do or do not do. That’s why we are often reminded in the scripture to stop comparing ourselves to others. 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 to help do the necessary work for us to be who we are. 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, **we often tend, by nature, 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 of it can become a distraction, a source of worry and anxiety, maybe even resentment.** And what is it that we are ultimately distracted from? In this story, it is being distracted from sitting at the feet of Jesus to attune ourselves to God’s Sacred Presence within, the position of a disciple, in order to listen and learn from him. Jesus, in fact, calls this “the better part”.

Here, then, are some questions to ponder this week as you reflect upon how you balance your journey of life and faith:

- 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, and to center and ground your life and being?
- How do you find a home in the Sacred Presence of God in your midst and within you, and in the presence of others – especially those right in front of you every single day?
- Is your discipleship in balance?

The story of Martha and Mary, then, does indeed present the two sides of the same coin of faithful discipleship. But the point is **we are both Martha and Mary**, just as we are both the good Samaritan and the injured person in the ditch in need of help, even if it means learning from a cultural enemy. Today’s biblical lesson informs us that **if our discipleship coin turns up too often on the active Martha side then our internal spiritual life may get out of balance.** Therefore, our challenge is this: What needs to happen in your life and in our church life, so that the contemplative Mary side of the coin turns up an equal number of times?

Let me reiterate one more time, however, that **Luke’s story is not a condemnation of service and activity. Those are a given! It’s more of a critique and corrective to when we become distracted, worried, overwhelmed, burned out, exhausted, even resentful. Remember, worrying can be contagious!**

Perhaps, then, we need to take more seriously the simple instruction found in the Old Testament reading for this morning, **Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God.”**

*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 you, and us as a community of faith, in our spiritual discernment – finding a good and proper balance in our lives!

Amen.

Resources:

*Feasting on the Word*

Brian P. Stoffregen *Exegetical Notes* as [CrossMarks.com](http://CrossMarks.com)

Crystal DesVignes, "At Jesus' feet", *Christian Century*, 7-11-2022.