

“LOVING BY LISTENING”

Luke 10:38-42 July 21, 2019

You are having guests over for dinner. The meal is nearing completion. Do you (a) scurry about clearing the table and neatly organizing the kitchen for those who may later wander in for some after-dinner refreshment, or (b) sit, talk, and enjoy the guests who bring joy and life to your home?

Now, if you are a “type-A” personality, the answer is obvious.

You must put things in order, for you are convinced in your very being that neither you nor your guests will be able to truly relax and enjoy yourselves until these necessary tasks are completed. If, on the other hand, you are a “type-B” personality, it is equally obvious that a host’s concern that everything be “perfect” can ruin the whole evening. There comes a time in every good party when you just have to let the dishes stack up, the coffee get cold, and the butter melt, so that everyone may simply sit down and talk around the table.

It should be clear from the gospel reading appointed for this Sunday that Martha was a type-A, while her sister Mary was a type-B. But much more is going on in this story than just pop psychologizing or stereotyping. Nor is it just a quiz about the proper etiquette for hosts of a dinner party. For here the dinner guest is the Lord, and the underlying question is how to balance the competing demands of actively serving God and of being ministered to by God.

On this second week in our series on “Living as Disciples for the Transformation of the World” we consider the story of Jesus’ visit to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. In today’s story Jesus stops in at the home of Mary and Martha after passing through Samaria. In the gospel of Luke we are offered the stark contrast between Mary and Martha. Mary stops and listens; Martha stays busy.

Western, and increasingly, Eastern capitalist-driven cultures are all about Martha, to be sure. Productivity, getting things done, being on the move and available 24-7, the “never sleeps” economy—this is how you “get ahead in the world,” right? At least, it’s what many of our cultures, corporations, and political cultures seem to reward and call for more of, all the time.

The core problem Jesus identifies with Martha in this story is not that she is busy. It is that she is in an uproar (the verb here, *thotubazein*, comes from the noun, *thorubos*, which refers to the noise of a stirred-up crowd). She’s overwhelmed, distracted from what matters, and lashing out at every one else.

And not just her sister. Even her guest. Even if Martha was overwhelmed with trying to serve her guest, a basic and expected act of hospitality, here she has blown it. She tries to use her guest to do what she, in her uproar, is convinced must be done, right now!

Now I can really relate to Martha and I think many of you might, too. “Back in the day” when I was doing the big family dinners and entertaining friends I can easily remember that feeling of being “overwhelmed.” Getting everything on the table hot and ready to eat at the same time was quite the feat! Inevitably I would forget one dish in the refrigerator and not remember it until the meal was almost over—if then! I actually had a sister-in-law that was so focused on cleaning up after the meal that she started taking the dishes away before we could get a chance to finish eating!!

The one thing needful right now, Jesus says, is to listen, as Mary had chosen to do. If you want to serve your guest, or anyone else, you need to listen first. Really listen. Do nothing else. Let go of all other distractions. Turn off the livestream in your head that diagnoses what others need. Just listen. To love your neighbor as yourself, and to love God—both require this, first of all.

Turn off the uproar. Stop. Listen.

We don't know what Martha did next. But we do know what Luke reports Jesus did next. He was praying. (Luke 11:1).

When Luke reports that "a woman named Martha welcomed [Jesus] into her home" (10:38b), she is being presented as the head of the household not just as a hostess acting on behalf of her brother. Martha becomes one of a number of women in Luke's Gospel "who provided for [Jesus and the twelve] out of their resources" (including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, 8:1-3) and by these actions has already stepped out of the "traditional woman's role." What ever the contrast drawn by this story between the sisters Mary and Martha, it is not that one does "women's work" and the other breaks the gender barrier and becomes a disciple learning at the feet of the master (10:39-40a). Both of these women have stepped outside the gender-restrictive cultural expectations in the ways they relate to Jesus.

Perhaps in our examination of this text we have paid too little attention to the immediate context of Luke's Gospel itself. The evangelist has placed this story right after the parable of the Good Samaritan. As is well-known, that parable contrasted the actions of religiously respected individuals with those of a religiously despised person. Perhaps motivated by purity concerns (contact with blood or a dead body was ritually defiling) that would have prevented them from performing their duties, a priest and a Levite had "passed by on the other side" of the road when they came upon the beaten man. The Samaritan, by contrast, had met the man's physical needs by attending to his wounds and even paying for his lodging during his recovery.

With that story fresh in their minds, the initial readers of Luke's Gospel might well have sided with Martha when she raises her objection to Jesus. After all, isn't she doing precisely what the Samaritan had done? Someone in need of hospitality had come to her home, and she was acting as "a neighbor" by "show-ing him mercy" (cf. 10:36-37) through meeting his physical needs rather than focusing on her own religious needs to hear from the teacher. Shouldn't Mary help her with this important work just as the priest and Levite should have helped the man assaulted by robbers? But the evangelist has signaled the reader that identifying with Martha will lead one astray. She had raised her objection because she "was *distracted* by her many tasks" (10:40a). Ministry to physical needs is, in this instance, not a proper focus but rather a distraction.

Jesus himself reinforces this interpretation of the situation. Martha has been "worried and distracted by many things" (10:41b), but just how her focus should have been more limited is obscured by different translations of the Greek manuscript. In some textual witnesses, Jesus tells Martha, "There is need of only one thing" (so NTSV) –presumably the spiritual teaching "Mary has chosen [as] the better part" (10:42). Other manuscripts, however, report Jesus' correction to Martha as, "There is need of few things, or only one" (so NRSV notes), suggesting Martha has simply gone overboard in her hospitality. In either case, Jesus is underscoring the fact that Martha has the same need for the "better part" that Mary had chosen.

Perhaps the greatest pitfall, then, in interpreting Luke's story about Mary and Martha is the tendency to want to pick one to the exclusion of the other.

Like type-A personality types who find it almost impossible to relate to the type-B experience of the world in terms of responsibilities and values (and type-B personalities have just as much trouble relating to the values and responsibilities of "A" types), we want to say one is right and the other is wrong. But the overall context of this portion of Luke simply prevents us from making an either/or choice.

Remember that Jesus had related the Parable of the Good Samaritan in order to illustrate one aspect of the twofold requirement to "inherit 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" (10:25-27). If the Good Samaritan and Martha stand as ready examples

of what it means to “love your neighbor as yourself,” then Mary illustrates what it means to “love the Lord your God with all your heart...and with all your mind.”

A type-A spirituality that is *all* about service for others, even as motivated by a desire to establish the rule of God’s justice in the world, will sooner or later burn itself out. Unless Martha takes time to “sit at the Lord’s feet and listen” she will have neither the rest she needs to energize her for her work nor the insight and instruction she needs to know what is truly required even in her service for others.

A type-B spirituality that is *all* about communing personally with God, soaking up into one’s self all the “better part” of a relationship with the Divine, will sooner or later become so consumed with itself that it will, like the priest and the Levite, no longer be able to recognize the need to minister to others.

The very reason we commune with and learn from Christ is so that we can continue in others the ministry he has begun in us.

The question is ultimately not *whether* we should have a Martha-type or a Mary-type of spirituality, but learning to recognize the appropriate times *when* we should exercise our Martha-or Mary-type spiritualities.

There is goodness in work of all kinds. This story nowhere tells us to stop working, or only to meditate all the time, or to disengage from the duties we have toward one another. It tells us not to let ourselves become overwhelmed. It tells us instead to focus on what matters most. And to do that, first we must listen.

We love and learn to love better by listening to God, neighbor, and guest—all whom we serve and with whom we seek to serve. Amen and amen.