

SISTERS ARE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

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Lead Minister

Text: Luke 10:38–42

I am grateful to Nancy Geertz-Larson who submitted the text as part of our *Command to Preach* series. I drew this text from the submissions, and I love that Nancy goes right to the heart of the tug and pull this text creates in many of us and in the church over the years. And when I read this text, I think of my sisters. Some of you may know that I have ten sisters, and they have definite opinions about this text. Would you pray with me?

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Preachers and biblical scholars agree that Luke's story of Jesus' visit with Martha and Mary is filled with tension, misunderstanding, and ongoing negative and positive reactions. The story has been lifted up as a study in contrast, with Martha getting it wrong and Mary getting it right, according to how Luke describes Jesus' response to them. It's been difficult to read against the text because nobody wants to take on Jesus. And since we are reluctant to criticize Jesus, Martha becomes an easier target for reproach, and Mary becomes a more malleable example of humility. And so, we are stuck with a story weighted down with a lot of baggage, religiously and culturally. Peruse the religious section of bookstores or big box department stores, and you will find a number of terribly offensive titles that take as their subject Martha versus Mary, not as a story for all disciples, but as instruction for women to behave like Mary in their service to the church. Far too much has been read into the story, and many of us have projected onto it, often unintentionally, whole conclusions about women's roles in the church or who is responsible for domestic work or if preparing the meal is the only service women could render. It surprises many to know that there is no mention of a preparation of a meal in this text.

Preachers and ministers have not been careful enough in their reading and use of this story. We have all too often ended up setting up a dualism in women's service and discipleship, pitting women against each other. We have the added complication that for readers, historians, and biblical scholars, it is not entirely clear that Luke is reporting an actual historical event. At the time Luke was writing it, there was an internal struggle within Luke's community about the limits that should be placed women's ministry and leadership in the early church.

It should not be a strong point of contention when I assert that the Bible is a male-centered book. Perhaps that is why Luke tells a story about the sisters Martha and Mary that, when you take the basic set up, could have also been an account of two sisters' exemplary demonstration of faithfulness and discipleship to which all should aspire. Unfortunately, the story has been turned into a narrative of polarization and dualistic antagonism that has infected and inflected our current God-talk and religious expression. I hope we let this text live in its context while we glean from it what Martha and Mary are doing that will be instructive and constructive for our context.

If we look at what happened right before Jesus' visit with Martha and Mary, one wonders how we ended up with this way of looking at the sisters. In Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, after he appointed seventy-two

missionaries to spread the gospel and instructed them to share peace with households that welcome them; after he encountered a young lawyer and exhorted him to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your neighbor as yourself; and after Jesus illustrated to the young lawyer who a neighbor is through the parable of the Good Samaritan; Jesus entered a village where a woman Martha welcomed him into her home. Her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening to what he was saying. Luke characterized Martha as being distracted by her many tasks, which suggests that she herself is not sufficiently attentive to Jesus or is not interested in hearing the Word of God. Martha goes to Jesus to ask him to tell Mary to help her. Jesus chides Martha for being distracted by many things and praises Mary for choosing the better part because she is doing the necessary one thing.

It is not necessary for us to rescue the text or rescue Jesus from any of the current problematic implications of chiding Martha and praising Mary. However, I do want to advocate for both Martha and Mary and give them space to be fully realized actors in the faith. I caution us to not accept this as a woman's story. I invite us to not take the premise and conclusions of Luke's community that there is something all wrong about how Martha serves and all right about how Mary behaves. As we discern whatever is being described here, there is a lesson for all of us in our attempt to be faithful, not just something addressing women. This is not a commentary on competing postures of discipleship. This is not a shorthand for contemporary religious identities or traditions or theological approaches. This not a biblical establishment of a rule, rubric, or code of conduct to which all should strictly adhere over against another.

I do not believe—nor should we assume—that Luke shared this story so that we could fix archetypes for service and discipleship in stone for every generation of reader. I'm talking about declaring within our congregations that “she's a Martha” or “there goes a Mary.” Perhaps Luke simply could not tell a story of women's ministry and leadership in the community to which he was writing without pitting them against each other or diminishing their contribution. We do not have to aid and abet that approach. And we certainly should not feel obligated to allow a history of bad and abusive readings of this story to distort or diminish the good news and the service women have given to the church. We can keep this story as a site of struggle, whereby we resist setting Martha against Mary. Jesus is not against Martha and does not discount her service. We lift up the service that Martha renders while admiring Mary's devotion. We all remain vigilant against anything that might distract us from the work of faith, and nobody should let process and busyness crowd out communion and fellowship with God and each other. And we all learn how to be both hearers and doers of the Word. We reject polarizing our communities around the many ways and means we respond to our callings and share our gifts.

As one of my favorite preachers, Fred Craddock, has cautioned us in our reading of this story, “If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect.” There is no one perfect way to render service to God. Perhaps Martha and Mary show us the potential ways and varieties of service we can render.

Regardless of the political sensitivities to which Luke had to be mindful in talking about how women should participate in church, this story has within it an account of women's ministry and leadership during a chaotic and tentative moment in the early church, and we need not privilege one over the other. Martha welcomes and receives Jesus into her home, revealing a model of hospitality that Jesus instructed the missionaries to look out for and to the kinds of homes with which they should share peace. Martha is serving God and the Jesus Movement with what she has to offer, whether it is her home or some other support as needed. And if she is distracted, I suspect it is by what I see my women colleagues confronting—men, traditions, and systems that frustrate women's contributions because of outdated, patriarchal notions of who are called to be ministers. Mary sits at Jesus' feet to listen to what he is saying, modeling the discipleship to the Word being fulfilled in her hearing. And if she is praised in this instance, I just wonder

what they said about Mary when she inevitably became a doer of that word. How much praise would they give her then? These sisters are exercising leadership and ministry during a time when such would have been denied and resisted. These sisters are doing for themselves in ministry what had been assumed as only the province of men.

Martha and Mary are doing what all disciples do in light of an encounter with the Divine presence. When we hear the good news of the reign of God coming near, when we love God with all our hearts, souls, strength, and minds and our neighbors as ourselves, we will be inspired to show up and serve . . . just as Martha did by showing Jesus hospitality and Mary did by receiving God's word. Gathering ourselves in beloved community because of God's infectious love, grace, and mercy, we will be both hearers and doers of the word, regardless of sex, race, or any other identity. We can't be sure what happened so long ago in Martha's house when Jesus came to visit, but we do know that Martha and Mary were both faithful disciples whose service invites us to do likewise.