



“Balancing Spirituality”

Luke 10:38-42

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

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The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

The familiar story of Mary and Martha, like many biblical stories, is often misused by the church. It’s a story about clashing gender roles that can be and has been read in a variety of ways. Needless to say, some readings of the story spark controversy.

For example, a group of British women, deeply opposed to the suffragist movement, took the name “The Martha Society” from the main character in the story. On the other hand, many modern women consider Mary a heroine for challenging the traditional role assigned to women. For centuries, preachers and teachers have used Martha as a whipping girl for entirely other reasons.

Let’s hear the old story one more time and see what it says to us and, more importantly, what it might do to us.

Jesus just finished an encounter with a theologian during which he told the famous story we call The Good Samaritan. This theologian was an intellectually oriented man who loved the life of the mind and valued a good argument about ideas large and small. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a rebuke to the man. Jesus told him that thinking good thoughts about good things is not enough. “Go and do...” Jesus told him. There is more to faith than large, beautiful ideas. Genuine faith, by its very nature, causes us to act on what we believe.

A number of years ago, a well-known professor of Christian ethics at a notable seminary decided the view from his office was blocked by the trees on the adjoining property, a protected forest preserve. In the middle of the night, he was apprehended by the police cutting down those offending trees with a chainsaw. To say the least, there was a disconnect between the professor’s theories and his personal practice. The man knew all the ethical issues and all the ethical details of the Christian life. He taught them to his students. Like the theologian in Luke’s gospel, however, his spiritual-ethical life did not affect his actions – at least not that night.

Jesus’ point is that faith includes “going and doing,” which is more important than theories, abstractions, and lofty thoughts and ideas.

Meanwhile, back on the road, Jesus and his disciples arrived at the home of Jesus’ dear friends Mary and Martha, where he was a frequent guest. Significantly, Luke reports, Martha welcomed him to her home. She acted as head of the household, a role that was played by men in her world. Martha managed the elaborate rituals of hospitality and the traditional gestures of welcome which included a large evening meal.

As soon as her guests were settled, Martha hurried back to the kitchen and continued in her more traditional role as chief cook of the household. With many guests for dinner, she had lots of preparation still ahead of her.

Meanwhile, back in the first century equivalent of a family room, Jesus engaged in spirited conversation with his disciples. He was always teaching them something, and they always had plenty of questions.

Mary, Martha's sister, joined the disciples sitting at Jesus' feet learning from the Master. It was an extraordinary move in Mary's world. Learning was for men only. The Rabbis of the day put it bluntly:

Let your house be a meeting place for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst, but talk not much with womankind....He that talks much with womankind brings evil on himself and neglects study of the law.

That was a restriction Jesus ignored regularly. Women were an important part of his band of disciples. Women traveled with him, learned from him and supported his ministry. Mary was a disciple and welcomed in his classroom.

Back in the kitchen, Martha, however, was up to her elbows in soapsuds, pots and pans, and piles of food, while her sister sat on a stool listening to Jesus. Martha was not happy. The more Martha worked, the angrier and more resentful she became. "I'm in here working like a dog, she thought, "while she sits out there doing nothing. This meal isn't going to fix itself!" Many of you know how she felt.

Finally, Martha had enough. She marched into the family room, ignored Mary and yelled at Jesus, "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? You tell her to help me!"

Ignoring the insult, Jesus replied, (in the words of Eugene Peterson's translation):

Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing is essential, and Mary has chosen it – it's the main course, and won't be taken from her.

I don't think Jesus meant to demean Martha or her hard work on his behalf. He does suggest to her that there is more to hospitality and a grand dinner than may appear. Relationships matter more than administrative details.

Nor did Jesus suggest that contemplative Mary is superior to the activist Martha. He does suggest that the activist Martha open her own life to other ways of loving her neighbors (and her sister) than kitchen duties. And he suggests to all of us who tend to activism that we might think about slowing down and savoring relationships more than our busy work.

There is, however, a deeper, spiritual side to this story. It is a story about discipleship and genuine spirituality for disciples of Jesus Christ.

Remember the context of this story – context is always the cradle of interpreting any literature, especially the Bible. Luke is a master storyteller who arranged his material in a particular way for good reasons. He wants us to see the flow of his narrative.

Luke just finished telling the story of the Good Samaritan to a theologian who wanted to engage Jesus in theological dialogue. The man was an intellectual whose spiritual style was contemplative; he tended toward internal reflection about ideas and religious practice. He'd spent his life in the study with his books or in the Synagogue debating other Rabbis about the law.

Jesus told him in no uncertain terms, "Get out of your study. Get out of your head and go into the world where you must do what you believe. It's not enough to know the truth, you have to act on what you know and believe."

Don't just stand there. Do something. Stop talking and do something. Quit forming endless study groups and take action. Disband your committees and do something on behalf of God and your neighbor.

It is the nature of religious institutions to spend more time contemplating what to do than doing anything. We love to talk and are reluctant to decide. After all it's dangerous and usually controversial when we decide to act. Our corporate spiritual style tends toward the contemplative. We tend to join Mary in the study listening to the good teaching of Jesus.

Our tradition honors the contemplative side of spirituality. In the Reformed–Congregational tradition we think about our faith, we explain the faith and we teach the faith. Our spirituality tends to be inward, intellectual and makes sense. For centuries, we've taught our teenagers the catechism, a long list of facts and grand ideas about God and the faith. We have not been very good about getting ourselves or our young people to do something about that grand faith.

Jesus' friend Martha was quite the opposite. She was an activist disciple of Jesus. She was busy doing good deeds, acting the perfect hostess, and no doubt engaging in acts of mercy in the village. She was so busy she didn't have time to sit, learn and savor a relationship with Jesus and the community of disciples. She was so busy she couldn't hear the good word Jesus was teaching. Her endless activity robbed her of some of the larger gifts of faith, namely hearing the word and being with her disciple-friends.

Jesus told her, "Don't just do something. Stand there."

When Tom Long was teaching at Princeton Seminary, he was part of a group of advisors to some university chaplains. On one occasion, the advisors and chaplains were meeting when one of the advisors asked the chaplains to describe the moral life of modern university students.

After an awkward silence, one of the chaplains answered, "Well, I think you'll be pleased to know that in addition to working hard at their studies and preparing for careers, our students are busy doing volunteer work, tutoring underprivileged students, serving in soup kitchens and helping in homeless shelters."

As he was talking, Long says the Jewish chaplain began to smile and his smile broadened as the other chaplain talked on about student activism. Finally, someone asked him what he was smiling about. He replied:

I was just sitting here thinking. You are saying university students are good people, and you're right. And you're saying that they are involved in good social causes, and they are. What I was thinking is that the one thing they lack is a vision of salvation. If you do not have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can't get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down.

"Martha," Jesus said, "to do all you do with any satisfaction or reward, you need to stop long enough to capture a vision of what your work has to do with God's work on earth. You need to sit here and listen to my words. They contain life that will fill your soul, empower your life, and give meaning to your work."

Religious activism is empty without a larger vision to give it content, power and meaning. Working hard, even working hard for God without food for the soul, is finally exhausting and empty.

Our tradition has a long history of contemplation, theological reasoning and explaining. We need to hear Jesus' word to the lawyer, "Go and do." Thinking about faith is insufficient. Some in our tradition took the Christian faith to the streets in the '60s and

'70s. Social activism became a way of doing the Christian faith. Good enough, but too often that activist faith lost touch with the spiritual resources necessary for any action to be compellingly Christian. That wing of the church needs to sit down, think and build a faith large enough to sustain good works.

The Church Council is reading a book over the summer by Alice Mann. The book is about the complexities of being a growing church. In the book, Mann quotes two sociologists who studied mainline churches. Their critique is important for us to hear:

Mainstream churches deaden religious experience among their members because they give it no visible expression. They relativize it; they rationalize it; they bury it in rote tradition. The growing mainline churches are the spiritually oriented churches. Some of them are unapologetically liberal and heavily involved in community ministry...Yet the social and moral agenda of these churches is anchored in a deep, meaningful worship experience which conveys the expectation, the presumption, the surety that God is present in the service and in the lives of anyone who is open to God's Spirit.

According to the New Testament writer James, "Faith without works is dead." It is equally true, as Paul puts it, that works without faith is dead.

Genuine Christian spirituality must balance activism and contemplation. Few of us are good at that balancing act. We are too impatient to sit, listen and learn. Then some of us are too easily satisfied thinking about our faith, talking about this or that, discussing how the church should work or where it should go to actually do anything about what we talk about. Our denominations talk things to death and we committee things to inaction.

Active participation in a Christian community creates a balanced spirituality – if we pay attention. Each week we gather here in this quiet and spiritual place and with Mary listen, worship, reflect and love God. In quiet Sabbath rest, we gather to hear the word and to meet Christ and be transformed.

After church, we scatter to do God's work on earth. We take what we're learning about God and Scripture and bend our lives into conformity. Our careers, professions, avocations, roles, families and social lives have meaning beyond themselves. We are made to love God and do God's work. We are called and gifted to accomplish something with our lives beyond ourselves or even our work.

A former neighbor, who is a banker, told me at midlife he'd decided to use his means, gifts and position to heal God's broken world. A teacher told me it was worth the hassles and struggle of public school teaching to see the light go on in a student's eyes.

Last week I told Charles Sagay that he was making a difference on two continents by his faithful activism on behalf of the Baka people in Cameroon. He said he'd never thought of it that way and was overwhelmed by it. And, working with Charles, we are making a difference on two continents. Reflecting on the extreme poverty and need among the Baka people in light of the Christian gospel, Charles went to work on behalf of God and the Baka. Any conversation with Charles reveals that he is a man of deep spiritual resources that sustain him in his work.

We join him there – and here. Think about it!

Amen.