

Oh, Jesus! Or: Oh, Luke, for putting these words on Jesus' lips: "Martha, Martha! You are anxious and upset by many things, but only a few things are necessary--really only one. Mary has chosen the better part, and she will not be deprived of it." Now was it really necessary to pit one sister against the other, in such a "tsk! tsk!" tone of voice?

Granted, this story has played an important role in finding biblical support for the ordination of women. I remember poring over my copy of *Biblical Affirmations of Women* by Leonard Swidler, published in 1979. Every story was an *Ah ha!* moment. However, this Martha and Mary story has also fueled divisiveness and resentment, pitting women with different vocations in the church against each other. Generations of women, who run households, whether or not they work outside the home, have read this story and gotten very angry with Jesus. Who did he think was going to prepare and serve food for him if Martha didn't work in the kitchen to make it happen? Did Mary think that Martha would just carry her weight, too, and do all the work while she sat around with the luxury to listen?

And anyway, what's up with this affirmation of one woman's choice and criticism of the other? It seems totally out of character, especially because Jesus always emphasizes service and hospitality. Sharing a meal in particular is a prominent theme throughout Luke. We would expect Jesus to appreciate the one who welcomes them into her home and makes all the preparations. Shouldn't Mary help her sister? Should Jesus have criticized his host for suggesting that her sister should help with the work? So what's the justification for his dismissal of Martha's attention to the care of her guests?

If we want to simply talk about how busy Martha is and how Jesus is trying to get her (and us all) to slow down, then all we need is whatever story we've recently heard about someone working themselves into a heart attack. That's not a bad message. But hopefully we will also discern that there is more to the story. We might ask what the story accomplishes by portraying Jesus in an unexpected way. Maybe Luke intends for this story to jolt us out of our usual ways of thinking.

It would be good for us to remember here that Luke has a habit of creating parallel stories involving women and men in his gospel. Remember when the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah in chapter 1, and then again to Mary?

In the parables that Luke includes, there's one about a man planting a mustard seed, and then one of a woman mixing yeast and flour, of a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, and then a woman looking for a lost coin. Last week was the parable of the Good Samaritan from chapter 10, followed immediately by the Martha and Mary story. So there's plenty of evidence that there is intentionality in the way that Luke has organized his book, in this case in the words in between Jesus' chastisement of Martha and his affirmation of Mary: "only a few things are necessary--really only one."

When we take the two stories together, Good Samaritan with Martha and Mary, we can see the relationship between the two. And that relationship is the "one thing," the Great Commandment: 'You shall love 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.' We might look at these two stories both as parables--one told by Jesus, one told about Jesus. The Good Samaritan focuses on the meaning of loving the neighbor, while Martha--one thing. (Parables are always about the Realm of God)

And then, if this is a parable about Jesus, we don't have to worry about how Jesus could have been so rude to his host, how he could have been so dismissive of her hospitality. We also don't have to set up a good/bad dichotomy between the two sisters, or between housework and study, or between works and faith, or the active versus the contemplative life. For Luke, it is "hearing AND doing," not "hearing OR doing" that matters.

In this story, Mary's attention to Jesus' teaching is in fact more important than Martha's anxiety over household

duties, but the contrast is not between hearing and serving, but between hearing and agitated toil. All our efforts and deeds are to be balanced and even nourished by times of doing absolutely nothing but sitting and being with God. The balance is the “one thing.”

Last week I worshipped at St. Mary and St. Martha Lutheran Church on South Van Ness. If you’ve been in their sanctuary you’ve seen the beautiful mural on the wall behind the altar depicting the two sisters, both of them equally lovely, with long, dark flowing hair, both of them pouring water out of large clay jars. But one has her face turned upward toward the sky, while the other is looking down at her water jar. The symbolism is obvious. And as I sat there looking at the mural, I was struck by how, except for the tilt of a head, they are exactly alike. They are, in fact, one.

As we are one when we have our being and doing in balance. There’s nothing wrong with the doing. Looking at the Mary figure in the painting, I couldn’t help envision her spilling her water if she didn’t watch what she was doing. I suspect, though, that for most of us, our imbalance is not towards the being, but the doing.

Can you imagine what life would be like, even for a little while, without all of the things that keep us busy, if we would just sit and listen, like Mary at the feet of Jesus? You have to wonder how God get a word in edgewise over the cell phones, voicemail, television, radio, and computer messages that surround us? Our technological connectivity is wonderful (no need to be a Luddite), but the temptation is also great. I find that even when I sit in my chair and try to get a little quiet time, the laptop calls to me with promises of email and Facebook and other delights.

Sometimes we just have to turn it all off. We need to find ways to tend to our spiritual selves like careful gardeners who spend time nurturing new growth, pulling weeds when necessary, and gently showering the thirsty green plants with refreshing water. Maybe that’s something like what Jesus was teaching Mary. Maybe he was teaching from Psalm 131, "O God, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes fixed on things beyond me; in the quiet, I have stilled my soul like a child at rest on its mother's knee; I have stilled my soul within me . . . do not set your eyes on things far beyond you; just come to the quiet . . . Come and still your soul completely."

And the other side is true too. Martha’s imbalance was not that she was attending to the work of hospitality; it was that she had allowed her anxiety about it to override the “one thing,” the reason for the doing and the presence and calling of God in each and every moment. Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God*, writes about doing so while peeling the potatoes and doing the dishes. Imagine if we could hone this practice in all of our being and doing: even amid the stresses of work, the challenges of family life, the demands of community, church, even in our politics. God’s presence calls us to the “one thing,” to experience and bring forth beauty in the midst of strife and holiness in the midst of everyday tasks.

Henri Nouwen once wrote that our lives, while full, are often unfulfilled. "Our occupations and preoccupations fill our external and internal lives to the brim. They prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives." In other words, they keep our attention away from the “one thing”--You shall love 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. One commandment, one relationship, one thing. May we learn to fulfill it in all of our doing and our being.

Amen

### Amos 8:1-12

*In another vituperative outburst against social injustices of his time in the 8th century BCE, Amos vividly describes the fate that is about to befall his people. In an amazing series of images beginning with a basket of over-ripe summer fruit and ending with a famine, he depicts God's unrelenting judgment against the economic, political and religious chicanery of the rich toward the poor.*

This is what YHWH showed me--a basket of summer fruit.

God said, "Amos, what do you see?"

And I said, "A basket of summer fruit."

Then YHWH said to me, "The time is ripe for my people Israel;

I will no longer tolerate their atrocities.

The singers in the temple will wail that day:

So many corpses scattered anywhere.

Be silent!" It is the Sovereign YHWH who speaks.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and oppress the poor of the land,  
you who say, "If only the new moon were over so we could sell our grain,"

and "When Sabbath is over, we will sell our wheat,

charging higher prices for smaller portions, thus tilting the scales in our favor.

That way, we can buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals -

and even make a profit on the chaff of the wheat."

YHWH has sworn by the pride of Jacob: "I will never forget any of their deeds.

Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it?

Will the land not rise up like the Nile, rising and sinking like the river of Egypt?

"On that day," says YHWH, I will make the sun set at noon,  
and darken the earth in broad daylight.

I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation;

I will have your loins all in sackcloth, your heads shaved.

I will make the land mourn as one would mourn a dead child - all of this on that bitter day!

The time is coming, says YHWH, when I will send famine on the land;

not a famine of bread or thirst for water,

but a famine of not hearing the words of YHWH.

They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east;

they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of God,

but they shall not find it.

### Colossians 1:15-28

*Modern versions of this passage divide it into three paragraphs. The first speaks of the pre-existent, human, crucified and resurrected Christ. The second speaks of the reconciliation God effected through Christ. The third presents the vision of what God is doing in creating this new humanity and the cosmic universe in which we live and serve, as did Paul. Few statements of the whole gospel Paul proclaimed have the sweep of this one.*

Christ is the image of the unseen God,

the firstborn of all creation;

for in Christ were created all things

in heaven and on earth,

things visible and invisible,

thrones, dominions,

rulers, powers -

all things were created  
through Christ and for Christ.

Before anything existed, Christ existed, and all things hold together in Christ.

The church is the body; Christ is its head. Christ is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, and so Christ is first in every way. God wanted all perfection to be found in Christ, and all things to be reconciled to God through Christ - everything in heaven and everything on earth - when Christ made peace by dying on the cross.

At one time, you were alienated from God by the way you thought and the evil things you did. But now you are reconciled in Christ's mortal body through death, so that you can now stand before God holy, pure, and blameless - provided you persevere and stand firm on the solid foundation of your faith. Never let yourselves drift away from the hope promised by the gospel that you have heard, which even now is being preached to the whole human race, and for which

I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. Even now I find my joy in the sufferings I endure for you. In my own body I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Jesus, for the sake of Christ's body, the church. I became a minister of this church through the commission God gave, to preach among you the word in its fullness - that mystery hidden from ages and generations past, but now revealed to God's holy ones. God's will was to make known to them the priceless glory which this mystery brings to the nations - the mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory. This is the Christ we proclaim, while we admonish everyone and teach them in the full measure of wisdom, hoping to make everyone complete in our Savior.

#### Luke 10:38-42

*The lovely story of Jesus visiting Mary and Martha never ceases to raise romantic views of their relationship now featured in a modern novel. Jesus felt welcome in their home in Bethany and made his headquarters there when in Jerusalem. It lay only a short two kilometers east of the city on the Mount of Olives.*

Now as they traveled, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who seated herself at Jesus' feet and listened to his words.

But Martha, who was busy with all the details of hospitality, came to Jesus and said, "Rabbi, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

But Jesus answered her, "Martha, Martha! You are anxious and upset by many things, but only a few things are necessary - really only one. Mary has chosen the better part, and she will not be deprived of it."