



The Sisters



A Sermon By
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July 17, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2016-07-17-AAA.mp3>.*

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The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
July 17, 2016

Genesis 18:1-10a
Colossians 1:15-28
Psalm 15
Luke 10:38-42

I have a confession to make...I struggle with this story about Martha and Mary. Well, maybe it's more accurate to say, I struggle with how this story is frequently interpreted. Throughout history, interpreters of this text have tended to polarize Martha and Mary, forcing their listeners to put the sisters' actions in opposition to each other. Perhaps you have heard preachers pose the question, "Are you a Martha or a Mary?" This question characterizes the sisters, along with their deeds, as one-dimensional, as if the story were an allegory wherein each woman represents a paradigm. I don't think this dichotomy is what the author of Luke's gospel had in mind. After all, this isn't one of Jesus' parables, a story shared to impart a lesson in and of itself. Rather, this is an encounter that Jesus had with two of his followers as he journeyed to Jerusalem. It is part of his story. There is certainly insight to be gained from this passage, but it should be sought through the lens of discipleship in relationship with Jesus.

Let's take a closer look at the passage. Our periscope opens with Jesus' arrival in a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into the home that she shared with her sister Mary. This is all we know thus far about the women, for this passage is the first place they appear in Luke. The scene proceeds with Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his words, while Martha is "distracted by her many tasks." Martha comes to Jesus, asking him if he cares that she is the one left to do all the work without her sister's assistance. If you do care, "Tell her then to help me," Martha pleads with Jesus.

Martha's pleas express frustration and some worry. They also break with most norms of hospitality, both ancient and modern, by dragging a guest into a family dispute. My grandmother would raise an eyebrow at Martha for making such a public display of frustration before her guest. It is this frustration - this distraction - that evokes Jesus' response. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."

Please notice, Jesus doesn't reprimand Martha for her desire to offer hospitality through service. And he doesn't reprove her because she wants Mary's help. The Gospel of Luke applauds those who provide service to Jesus. And in fact Jesus will later refer to himself as "one who serves." So it doesn't make sense that Jesus would criticize Martha because she chooses to offer diligent service in the many tasks that need to be done to provide for her guests and household. Such tasks are themselves manifestations of discipleship. Martha's problem lies, in this instance, in succumbing to distraction while performing service. The verb "distracted," used in this passage, means literally to draw away from or divert.

At the beginning of our short passage, Martha was focused on Jesus through her gift of service and hospitality. It was after all, she who welcomed Jesus, proclaiming him Lord. Her sister Mary focused on Jesus by sitting at his feet and listening to him. They both centered their attention on Jesus. However, at some point, Martha became distracted. Her focus was diverted from her service to Jesus. She was drawn away from him. Therein lies the issue. For those who would follow Jesus, Jesus must be the primary focus of our lives. All action and intentions flow from Jesus who is at the center of Christian discipleship. When Jesus praises Mary's having chosen the better part, he refers to her singular focus on Jesus himself. Jesus says, "there is need of only one thing." This does not mean one form of devotion, but rather one object of devotion. To be genuine, acts of discipleship – whether contemplative, active, or anything else – need to maintain such a focus on Christ.

So the question, "Are you a Martha or a Mary?" is a moot point. The real question this gospel passage poses is, Who or what holds the center of your attention? What are you focused on? Focused attention on family, friends, good works, a life of contemplation – these are all important, but as Christians our love and devotion to these things stem from our relationship with Jesus Christ. Our Colossians reading this morning states, "in him all things hold together." In our broken and fractured world, Jesus offers healing and new life. He offers another way of existence. He offers a relationship with God incarnate. Just as he reminded Martha that there is need of only one thing, so he reminds us.

In a day an age when we are plagued by worry and distraction, when inattention or partial attention is the most that many of us are capable of giving, we are invited to re-center ourselves this day. Pause. Take time this morning to be fed in word, sacrament, and community. Make time to quiet your inner self from the many things that distract you. Be in touch this day with the one thing that is needed, the better part, which will not be taken away. In him, we find our purpose, our calling, our strength, and our center. Amen.