
Jesus loves Mary, and Martha, too!

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 11 – Year C

Listening to this Gospel about Mary and Martha, what were you thinking or feeling? Some of you may have felt comforted or assured; others inspired; others bored. After all, this isn't the first time you've heard this story or a sermon on it! But my guess is that some of you were feeling annoyed, defensive, even downright angry. Yes, for such a short passage, this sure stirs up a lot of different, strong reactions and can be quite polarizing.

This should come as no surprise, given the polarizing way that this story is often presented and interpreted. You know what I'm talking about, right? The take that's all about naming what Martha did wrong and what Mary did right—and offering a neat moral lesson that will help you make a better choice, and avoid Martha's mistake.

You can fill in the blanks with all kinds of answers: Martha is stressed-out, distracted, or busy, while Mary is serene, focused, still. Martha serves Jesus, while Mary listens to him. Martha misses what's important, while Mary gets it.

Sometimes, the comparison isn't about the two women themselves, but about what they represent: two kinds of hospitality, two forms of discipleship, two sides of the spiritual life (the active and the contemplative), two roles for women.

But today I find myself resisting this kind of comparative, either/or interpretation. Why, you ask? Well, maybe because I tend to identify with Martha; or because I'm grateful for all the Martha's, male and female, who've made it possible for us to be here today. Maybe it's because I'm tired of all the comparing and competing we do in our society and in our relationships; and tired of caricatures of women (the fuss-budget, busy-body, do-gooder, martyr, perfectionist, nag); and tired of narratives that put us in opposition, measuring us against each other and suggesting that our value depends on how we measure up. Or maybe it's just because I'm the oldest of three siblings, and a mother of three children myself. So I know something about sibling rivalry, and I know that Jesus' response would make for very bad parenting advice!

Take a fairly common scene in my household. We've finished dinner, my teenage kids have fled the kitchen, and I call to them to come back and put up the dishes. After my third request, one of them peels herself off the sofa, and returns to the kitchen, with only a minimum of grumbling. She's made it more than halfway through the dishes, and her brother is still playing Fortnite in the other room. Feeling indignant and abandoned, she tells him to come do the rest, or at least help her finish. Amazingly, he still doesn't hear, so she turns to me: "Why do I have to do everything?" (Never mind that I shopped for the food, set the table, prepared dinner, and did the bulk of the dishes while I was cooking!) "All he does is sit there playing his game. Why don't you make him help?" Behind this, of course, are deeper questions: "Do you love me as much as you love him? Do you value me, too? Why don't you treat us justly? What about the values and principles you're teaching us?"

And imagine I answered: "Lindsay, Lindsay. You're being such a whiner and busy-body. What you're doing, what you're worrying about, really isn't important, after all. Why can't you be more like your brother? He made the better choice!" That wouldn't do much to ease her mind, or to defuse the tension between them.

And yet, isn't this basically how Jesus responds, at least the way this story is often read? Sure, I'm no Jesus, and Mary isn't just playing Fortnite. But when Martha cries out to Jesus, his answer doesn't seem very loving, or wise. On the contrary, it

seems that it would just feed her insecurity and resentment, make her feel trapped in an impossible double bind, and drive a greater wedge between the sisters. Sadly, it has fed all kinds of comparisons and rivalries and double-binds since, too. Surely this isn't what Jesus intended! Surely Jesus offers another way!

Much of the interpretation I've been describing hinges on the word "better." I mean, let's face it, "better" is always a comparison. That's the definition of the word! But in the King James Version, and the Greek itself, Jesus says that Mary has chosen "the *good* part." The move to "better" is often based on context, and reasonably so.

But what if ... what if Jesus is not saying that one sister, or one way, is *better* than the other, but affirming that Mary's choice is good, too; that neither sister is threatened nor diminished by the other; that they both serve the One in their own good and beautiful way.

What if, when he says Martha's name twice, he's not patronizing or scolding her, but affirming *her*, too, and gently calling her back—to him, to herself, to this moment, to relationship. And what if when he says she's distracted or encumbered, he's not blaming or criticizing, but acknowledging her—showing her that he sees her, and the heavy load she's carrying.

What if Jesus is drawing her, and us, out the zero-sum game, out of the binary thinking that says that one person's success must be another's failure—that there is not enough love, or goodness, or value or belonging, or rest or ministry, to go around? What if he's telling Martha, and us, to trust that his love and our value don't depend on how we compare—that we're so secure in his love that we can celebrate the good in others, and in ourselves?

This isn't the only way to read this scripture, of course. But it's where I land today: with a lot of what ifs that come from my own strong reaction to this story and its history of interpretation, and from a commitment to the Jesus who points us beyond these mutually destructive ways of seeing each other—to a way of mutual love and respect and compassion, grounded in his more-than-abundant love for all of us.

Wherever *you* land with this or any scripture, I hope you'll listen to your response and trust that God is in it, too—and let your reactions and experiences tangle with the Word. Indeed, when we talk back to the Bible, or to interpreters and preachers, or to Jesus himself, we are praying, and working out our relationship with God, and ourselves, and one another.