
Mary, Martha, and Koosh Balls—They're All Great!

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Ashley Carr
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 11, Year C

Last week my children, Mary Stuart and Shepherd, went to a birthday party at which they each received a little bag of party favors. Mary Stuart, who is five, immediately examined the contents of her bag on the car ride home wherein she discovered some candy, stickers, and one brand new koosh ball. If you're unfamiliar, a Koosh ball is this shaggy ball made of dozens of rubbery strings, an iconic 80s toy apparently making a comeback. Mary Stuart's koosh ball was red and green and her absolute favorite color, blue. It feels funny and looks silly and she was enamored as any five-year-old would be upon discovering a koosh ball for the first time. Once we got home, Shepherd, who is two, decided to unpack his gift bag which revealed some candy, stickers, and one brand new koosh ball. Shepherd's koosh ball was the exact same size and shape as Mary Stuart's, but his had every color of the rainbow, not just red, green, and blue.

And as soon as Mary Stuart saw Shepherd's ball, it began:

Mom which koosh ball is the best? Mary Stuart asked.

They're both great. I replied.

But is mine the best or Shepherd's the best?

They're both great.

Is this one with these colors the best or is that one with those rainbow colors the best?

They're both great.

I think mine is the best, do you think mine is the best?

I think that they're both great.

Yeah, mine's probably the best, I'm pretty sure.

They're both great.

In Mary Stuart's five-year-old mind, the only way to cope with her brother having the rainbow colored koosh ball, a koosh ball with colors different from hers, was to establish hers as the best. Whether right, wrong, or utterly irrelevant. For hours, days, still today, we are talking about which koosh ball is the best. My answer remains the same, they're both great.

Please spare me your feedback at the door.

Inside and outside of sibling rivalry, competition for being the best, having the best, the position as favorite, is a tale as old as time.

When we hear this familiar story of Mary and Martha, we often jump pridefully to categorize ourselves as one or the other. It's like a quiz in Cosmo Magazine that begs the question, "Are you a Mary or a Martha? Answer these twelve questions to find out!" We simplify these friends of Jesus, these disciples, to one who over functions and one who under functions. And in the case of the story we hear today, the Marys seem to get all

the glory while leaving Marthas in the lurch.

But I wonder if this isn't a story about which sister is best. I wonder if this isn't a story about right and wrong ways to express our faith, Jesus approved behavior and Jesus condemned behavior.

As we approach the story, it would do us well to remember that this is a group of friends. Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who may or may not have been there, they were buddies. This story happened on one night of their friendship, it is one snapshot in a much larger picture of their time together, their ministry, their grassroots effort to bring the Son of God to the masses. This Jesus stuff was still new, the work was still revealing itself, they were still navigating the draw to adore this man and befriend him. There was much more going on than what we see in this little snapshot.

So, it's a bit unfair of us to reduce Jesus' opinion of Martha or Mary to this one moment.

We can't say for sure that Jesus didn't want Martha doing kitchen work, and that he only ever wanted everyone sitting at his feet. Hospitality was a huge deal to Jesus. Serving, providing, caring for others that stuff mattered to him. Being hospitable, nurturing one another, and honoring God's children is a way to honor God, Jesus teaches that over and over. I'm certain that there were days when Martha's efforts were praised and when Mary could have been a touch more involved in the chores. So, I'm sorry to say to the Marys, it doesn't seem like this is a story about Martha being wrong for being in the kitchen.

When I read it, I don't hear the interaction between Jesus and Martha as a rebuke. It doesn't sound like Jesus telling Martha how wrong she is for doing the dishes, or even for complaining about her doting sister. Jesus doesn't strike me as competitive or worried about ranking behavior. Instead, it seems to me that this story tells of a tender Jesus, friend to Martha, a teacher. It's a story about Jesus who offered permission to Martha, to all of us to be with him in a variety of ways.

There are many ways to be with Jesus.

It's not a contest. There isn't a best way to be with Jesus, there are many ways to be with Jesus.

Well, Ashley, if that's true, then why did Jesus seem to favor Mary's choice to sit at his feet? Fair question. Jesus wasn't telling Martha that she was wrong for doing the necessary tasks of hospitality. Instead, he was offering to her that she could take a load off, like Mary, and find herself untethered by that work. He invited her into another way of being with him. One that's slow, still, and undistracted. While Martha faithfully served, Mary demonstrated presence with Jesus in a different way. She showed a still, slow understanding that Jesus is the object of her devotion.

It was another way of being with Jesus.

So, he offered it to Martha.

Perhaps all the necessary work of the evening was done. Dinner was finished, bellies full, dishes cleaned, floor swept, and Jesus noticed Martha continuing on busying herself with that long list of never-ending house chores, chores that could wait, chores that pulled her away from stillness and rest. Tenderly, Jesus invited her to put it all down, to take a rest, and try out another way.

For all kinds of reasons, we find ourselves stuck in patterns, we pick one way of being with Jesus. There are the worker types who thrive buzzing around this room before church seeing their service as a key expression of their faith, and it is. There are the contemplatives who stop at the votives to light a candle and in the still quietness pray before the organ bellows. There are those who pack lunches, who carry torches, who sing. Some of us sit, stand, and kneel, some don't move, sing or say a word. Some come here and meet Jesus to cry while others come meet Jesus to rejoice. There are many ways to be with Jesus. So many worthy and great ways to be with Jesus and they are all happening right now in this room together.

In this story with two faithful friends and disciples of Jesus, we find our Shepherd offering a broader way for Martha. There's nothing wrong with the tasks, but when we find ourselves distracted by our patterns, we might forget the object of our devotion, the Light sitting right there in our living rooms, in our kitchens, in our churches.

Perhaps you think of yourself as a still and focused Mary, or a busy serving Martha. Somedays I'm Mary, somedays I'm Martha, somedays I'm Lazarus and not even in the story. Because the object of our devotion is Jesus, and because Jesus is big and broad, there are many ways to be with him.

Instead of digging our heels into the right, wrong, good, bad, better and best, maybe we look tenderly at the ways that others are faithfully being with Jesus as an invitation to broaden our own practices, seeing and being with Jesus in new and different ways.

This Jesus that we follow has many access points. Our faith is alive, and it moves and breathes with the seasons of our lives. All along the way, Jesus pleads with us to be with him in all kinds of ways.

Mary and Martha offer two ways to be with Jesus, and I say, neither is the best, they're both great.