

Make Her Help Me!

Luke 10:38-42

Preached June 21, 2009
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Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Introduction. Reading in this story the comment of Martha telling Jesus to tell Mary to help her reminds me of a humorous story that happened early in my ministry. On Sunday morning in a small rural church I served, our pianist was seated at the piano while trying to keep an eye on her 4 year old son. He had grown somewhat active and noisy during the service and she looked at him and said in a whisper, "Be quiet." Immediately he responded by pointing at me in the pulpit and said, "Well, make him be quiet too." (How quickly children learn about preachers and preaching.)

There are few stories in scripture easier for most of us to understand and to which we can connect than the one just read. Most of us have been in situations where we have seen a Martha-Mary situation. Some of us have been Mary or Martha in those situations. The application for this story is widespread and can be acted out in our homes, in many social situations, and in the church.

On the surface, the theme Luke seems to be communicating appears straight forward – don't be worried about the details and pay close

attention to Jesus. Yet when any of us dive into the story and begin to swim in it, we discover it is much deeper and complex than what appears on the surface. Do you want to join me in diving into this pool and taking a swim in these waters? If that does not sound inviting, how about mounting a float and relaxing in this pool for a period of time?

The setting.

While the gospels do not provide a full picture of Jesus' relationship with Martha and Mary (how they met, the connection with other stories, etc.), they do make it clear that Martha and Mary were friends of Jesus. Jesus was welcome at their home and he did on occasion take advantage of that privilege.

In Jesus' day, just as in our own, the practice of hospitality was very important. When guests or friends came to visit, they were welcomed into the home, offered the comforts that home could afford and were usually fed. Most of us understand and appreciate this type of hospitality. To be less than hospitable is looked down upon in scripture and by the Christian community.

Last fall, Patty and I met the parents of our newest daughter-in-law. We traveled to White Hall, AR. They welcomed us into their home with graciousness and fed us with their finest foods. They also took time to show us around the area. Hospitality is an important practice in any age and every context.

When Martha and Mary opened their home to Jesus, it was a significant event because a significant entourage traveled with him. We know he had the 12 who were with him nearly all the time. Also there were a few others who tended to their needs. Preparing and caring for 13-20 guests is major chore.

From the three stories in the gospels telling of Jesus' visits at Mary and Martha's home, it is clear that Martha was the person who served as hostess. She was the one who always greeted Jesus and the one who organized things for his visit.

Knowing about the importance of hospitality in Jesus' culture and the role that Martha played helps us to understand her reaction when Mary failed to help Martha care for the guests. Knowing what we know and what some of us have experienced, we might consider Martha to be the hero of the story rather than Mary.

The Contrasts.

If this story is taken in isolation, those among us who are the doers and host-types, question Jesus' words and mild rebuke toward Martha. It does not seem fair because she is doing all the work and Mary is taking it easy. Luke, in telling this story, does a masterful job in rousing his audience's interest and their questions.

Alan Culpepper suggests that to be properly understood this story must be placed alongside the story that precedes it (NIB, IX, 231). A lawyer came to Jesus inquiring what he must do to obtain eternal life. Jesus asked him what the Law said. He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus told him if he did that he would live. Unsatisfied with the discussion, the lawyer continued and asked who his neighbor was. To that question, Jesus told story of we know as the Good Samaritan.

In these three instances, Luke masterfully introduces his readers to some intriguing contrasts.

He begins by contrasting the two great commandments: *Love God with everything* and *love your neighbor as yourself*. If one loves God with all she has, will she have any love to love neighbor? From the story, we find that love for God does not diminish love for neighbor.

Luke contrasts two heroes in the stories. The Samaritan demonstrated love for neighbor when he came across a man in grave need who had been abused by thieves. He willingly put his own life in jeopardy, tended to the man's needs, took him to a place for safety and care and then paid for the services. Is it fair to say that he offered the man hospitality?

Mary on the other hand showed love for God by sitting at the feet of Jesus. She took time to hear his words. To all observers, she seemed to take a more passive posture of being in Jesus' presence. She did not raise a finger to care for Jesus' needs or those of his disciples. In the view of Martha, she sat idly by as Martha gave the care. Yet Jesus said Mary chose the good part.

Here we find two different heroes who show their love in different ways. Yet both are commended by Jesus. Each is an unlikely hero – a despised half-breed Samaritan highlighted as a hero to a Jewish audience and a woman sitting at the feet of the master learning. Both were out of the “normal” place.

Many of you have read or seen that the UMC is introducing a new advertizing campaign called “Rethink Church.” It is designed to reach 19-34 year olds. The basic theme of this campaign is to demonstrate that church is more than gathering in a place for worship or fellowship. Church is about going out into the world and serving those in need. Our denomination hopes this message will resound with young adults and attract them to join us in the mission for Christ. Church is both worship and fellowship as a community of Jesus and serving others in his name.

Luke draws the contrast of two sisters. I am extremely amazed how siblings can be raised in the same environment by the same parents and relatively the same time yet be so different. They act differently, think differently and have different personalities.

Martha was painted as a type A personality. She was a take charge, time conscious, driven, aggressive, demanding and hard working person. We are told in the text that she was distracted by her tasks of service. Those of you who from time to time host others, you could list what those tasks were. She came to Jesus demanding that he instruct Mary to help her. Her personality subjected her to being somewhat volatile. She

could be an in-your-face and direct with her words type of person.

Mary on the other was a type B personality – laid back, easy going and relaxed. She was content to sit at Jesus' feet and to listen. It may not have crossed her mind what needed to be done to host Jesus and his crew. In the Gospel of John we read of her being rather sensitive emotionally at the death of her brother and extravagant with her expression of love toward Jesus when she anointed his feet with expensive perfume.

In social settings whether it is family, community or church settings, type A and type B personalities are often frustrated with each other. Type A frequently views type B as lazy and lacking direction. Type B regards type A as uptight and driven. It is interesting to acknowledge that in church (and even on our staff) we have both A and B personalities.

Martha was clearly a task oriented person. She had a sense of what needed to be done and was not hesitant to do what was necessary. She had a servant's heart. She could see what needed to be done and would do it.

Mary on the other hand was a people person. She seemed to connect with others more on a heart level. There was a deep level of emotional connection she shared with others.

Mary was a “sit and soak” person while Martha was a “stand and serve” person. Mary was that type of person who would be present every time there was a great spiritual enrichment study. Martha was the type who would be the first to volunteer when the call went out for service.

Jesus loved and was a friend to both type A –Martha and type B – Mary. There is no evidence that he preferred one over the other. They were different and unique yet both were loved and served Jesus in their own way.

The stories of the Good Samaritan and Martha and Mary serve as both a commendation and a mild rebuke to each personality. The Samaritan who serves is commended and Mary who

sits and soaks is commended. Martha who serves is rebuked along with the religious guys who did not help the fallen man.

Application.

As interesting as this may or may not be, what can we learn and apply from this message.

- As Jesus' followers, we must remember the centrality of loving God and neighbor. It is not an either/or but a both/and.
- There are the Martha- Mary among us – A/B personalities, people-task oriented, sit and soak – stand and serve. Nearly all of us lean one or the other way on those spectrums. Together we make up the body of Christ and the family we call humanity. We are called to understand and appreciate those on the other end of the spectrum.
- While we lean in one direction, there is a need for balance. If we become exclusively “sit and soak” or “stand and serve” people, it will have a detrimental effect on us personally and on the church. Type A people do need some time to relax and Type B need direction.
- We need to pray for perceptivity to know what is needed in given situations. When do we need to take charge and move forward and complete the tasks and when do we need to relax and wait?