

Sermon for 17th July 2022, Year C, Trinity 5, Proper 11

Genesis 18:1-10a; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-end

Sermon

After the parable of the Good Samaritan last week, here comes another very well-known passage in the gospel of Luke – the story of Mary and Martha – which divided Christians, and women in particular, into two types for the next two thousand years. You're either a Martha, who fusses around doing all the practical busywork, getting annoyed at everyone else who isn't also working, or you're a Mary, head in the clouds but no earthly good. And to make things worse, Jesus says that Mary is better, which just annoys all the fed-up Marthas even more.

Hands up who is on some kind of rota this morning, or has already prepared and put the dinner in the oven, done laundry or ironing, or made breakfast for their beloved? You're probably not feeling very positive towards little miss goody-two-shoes Mary, the teacher's pet, now are you?

This morning I'd like to tell you that perhaps this passage has not been very well understood over the years. I'd like to talk about the feminist undertones in the story, and offer you some alternative translations that might help you think again about what Jesus is saying.

Let's start with the traditional understanding of the story. Mary and Martha are at home in Bethany. Jesus arrives unexpectedly with numerous male disciples in tow. They are hungry and thirsty and need a place to rest. Martha goes into a frenzy of food preparation. Mary, her irresponsible (possibly younger?) sister, sneaks out of the kitchen to listen to Jesus. Martha, having irritably banged pots around to no avail, comes looking for Mary and finds her at the feet of Jesus.

Against all propriety she's sitting in the company of men, as if she were a disciple! Martha grumpily demands that Jesus tell Mary to get back to her proper work. Jesus however criticises Martha's busywork and her bossy attitude, and indicates that Mary 'got it right' with her attentive, passive, adoring posture.

This has led to centuries of Christian commentary declaring that active practical service is entirely inferior in calling and worth to contemplative study and worship. Thus, the quiet intellectual vocation is always preferred to noisy practical work, and so the white-collar worker, the academic and the monk are superior to the blue-collar worker, and especially superior to women's work in kitchens and later in factories. And even the highest calling a woman can aspire to is to be obedient to male authority and listen passively and silently to their teaching. So we were given three possible role models for women: the nun, the housewife, or the redeemed prostitute, as exemplified in the gospels by Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene.

And so all those who feel called to be like Martha are denigrated and devalued. Are you busy like Martha? You're doing it all wrong, or at least missing God's best for your life. Jesus says so.

Martin Luther during the reformation really stuck the knife in. He said "Martha, your work must be punished and regarded as worthless... I want no work but that of Mary, which is faith". How smug and pompous!

In this way, Mary and Martha became examples throughout history, creating divides between Introverts and Extroverts, between Faith and Good Works, between Protestant and Catholic, between New Testament and Old Testament, even between Christianity and Judaism.

But is this really what the text says? If you read it carefully, you may spot some things that we've assumed but which aren't actually written.

For example, we assume that Martha has gone into the kitchen to prepare food for all the disciples, and she is annoyed that Mary is pretending to be a disciple amongst the men. However, there's nothing here to suggest she's preparing food. The word given for the work she is doing is *daikonia* in the Greek, from which we get the word *deacon*. When Jesus and the disciples do ministry it is the same word, *daikonia*. So Martha is doing ministry in the same sense that the disciples are doing ministry. In the earliest copies of the scripture, Martha doesn't welcome Jesus *into her home*, she simply 'receives Jesus', which is to say she became his disciple. No home is mentioned. And anyway, Bethany where Mary and Martha and Lazarus lived, was down south near Jerusalem, and at this point Jesus has only just set off from Galilee in the north. So the text basically says that Martha is a disciple of Jesus and very active in ministry, about which she's anxious.

And there's more. The translation which reads "She had a sister Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet" ignores the Greek word 'kai' which means 'and', or 'also'. So that line actually says, "She had a sister Mary who *also* sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying". In other words, Martha is one of Jesus' wider group of travelling disciples, and so is Mary. They are perhaps part of that group of women who travelled with Jesus and supported him out of their resources as we saw earlier in chapter 8 of Luke's gospel.

And this listening to Jesus as a disciple is not a one-off event. The Greek makes it clear that this is something that has gone on over a long period of time, not a one-time occasion for someone who'd normally never leave the house.

Now, we may be pushing the point, but in the story, we don't even know if Mary is present. Neither Martha nor Jesus actually speaks to her directly. They talk about her as if she's not there. Is it possible that Mary is away doing ministry with the larger group when this event occurs? After all, the disciples aren't mentioned either. If you look carefully, only Jesus is received by Martha. Is it

possible that what Martha is really annoyed about is that Mary is away being a travelling disciple, while Martha is struggling along with her ministry on her own? She wants her sister back to help.

So what is Jesus now saying? That practical work in the home is pretty worthless and sitting passively in prayer is the only worthy vocation, especially for women? No. The only thing he criticises is Martha's anxiety, not her ministry. *He's inviting her to let go of her anxiety and her desire to suck others into her worries.*

What we see here are two beloved disciples, both involved in ministry, just as Jesus' other disciples are, and the only difference between them is Martha in this one instance is unnecessarily anxious.

What then is Mary's 'better part, which will not be taken away from her'? Well, it's probably not the vocation of sitting adoringly at Jesus' feet while others do all the cooking and cleaning.

The Greek words are perhaps better translated as 'good portion' rather than 'better part', and this echoes the Old Testament psalms where *God* is often referred to as the good or best portion – the best thing one could possibly inherit or receive as a gift. And even more powerfully, to receive a portion always comes with a duty or obligation to pass it on, to share it with others. So the portion that Mary has received, is not only God's love, but also the obligation to share God's love with other people.

Here then is my belief: no passive women these, never leaving the home, whose only role is to cook for the men or listen to their wisdom. Both are strong women, active in ministry, lovers of God, supporters of Jesus both materially and spiritually, personally engaged in the same work as the other disciples, both male and female. Later they will argue and weep with Jesus when he fails to arrive in time to save Lazarus from dying. Martha even dares to argue theology with the Son of God! Oh how I wish I'd seen *that!*