

Proper 11 C Sermon  
Luke 10:38-42  
July 17, 2022

*“Listening and Doing”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*<sup>38</sup>Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup>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.” <sup>41</sup>But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”*

~o~

Have you ever found yourself busy in the kitchen while the life of the party was out in the living room? I love to cook and I love to entertain and I love making everything perfect. And, honestly, I love it when my guests can entertain themselves for those first few minutes after they arrive and before I serve the first course. I don’t really want help in the kitchen. Does that make me a control freak? Maybe just a little.

Martha, on the other hand, she resented the fact that her sister had abandoned her as soon as the guests arrived. It’s not hard to imagine her huffing and puffing and banging around the kitchen, hoping to catch her sister’s attention. But, when Martha’s attempt at a subtle guilt trip didn’t work, she went straight up to Jesus, called out

Mary's slothful behavior, and asked that he instruct her to come and help. Instead, he gently chided: "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."

How would you have responded? Would you have sulked back to the kitchen with your head hung? Or would you have stormed out of there, swearing under your breath and judging: "Well, if he thinks I'm gonna put supper on the table for that band of dirty, stinking, ungrateful, travelling preachers, he's got another thing coming!"

We don't actually know how Martha responded. The story ends there and we're left to make sense of it. If we are to look at this story in isolation, we might infer, in light of Jesus' gentle rebuke of Martha, that sitting at his feet and listening like Mary is preferable to serving like Martha. From a feminist perspective we might wonder if listening to the male teacher or serving the male teacher are really the only options available to women—a fair point, I think. The truth is, though, like most stories from the Bible, context matters. Firstly, in the context of first century Palestine, disregarding social expectations of women to sit at the feet of the teacher like a man, was a pretty progressive act. Furthermore, the teacher defending such an act was itself pretty progressive.

Secondly, this text is but five verses lifted out of a single chapter. Prior to this brief episode, the same chapter tells of the sending out of seventy disciples before detailing Jesus' conversation with a young lawyer and the parable of the Good Samaritan. The context of today's reading matters because Jesus had instructed the 70 to be fully reliant on the hospitality of strangers, people like Martha. Then, he told a parable in which the hero was a Samaritan who served a wounded man by bandaging him up, getting him to an inn, and paying for his care. Jesus placed a very high priority on hospitality and service!

The context in which this morning's reading is placed is of paramount importance for understanding its true meaning. Jesus was not simply praising Mary for listening and scolding Martha for doing and serving. Both listening and serving are important. The truth is, though, to serve others as they need to be served, we must first listen to them in order to ascertain how best to serve them.

Feminist and activist and organizer Gloria Steinem tells a story in memoir that feels especially relevant to our discussion. She writes:

I took a course in geology because I thought it was the easiest way of fulfilling a science requirement. One day the professor took us out into the Connecticut River Valley to show us the 'meander curves' of an age-old river.

I was paying no attention because I had walked up a dirt path and found a big turtle, a giant mud turtle about two feet across, on the muddy embankment of an asphalt road. I was sure it was going to crawl onto the road and be crushed by a car.

So with a lot of difficulty, I picked up the huge snapping turtle and slowly carried it down the road to the river.

Just as I had slipped it into the water and was watching it swim away, my geology professor came up behind me.

"You know," he said quietly, "that turtle has probably spent a month crawling up the dirt path to lay its eggs in the mud on the side of the road—you have just put it back in the river."

I felt terrible. I couldn't believe what I had done, but it was too late.

It took me many more years of organizing to realize that this parable had taught me the first rule of organizing.

Always ask the turtle.<sup>1</sup>

When I was in college, I volunteered one summer for a service-learning trip to the Eastern European country of Bulgaria. While we were there we visited a church in the coastal city of Varna. The building was new, large, and well appointed, but the church members related that when a large American denomination had built them the new church, they failed to account for the extremely high cost of heating the facility. The congregation held worship not in the large and well-appointed sanctuary, but in a basement classroom because they couldn't afford to heat the sanctuary. Recognizing the congregation's need for a van to bring people to church, the same large American denomination purchased them a beautiful 15-passenger Ford. The only problem was that the van was too large to traverse the narrow streets of the city. It spent its useless life in a parking spot at the church.

Always ask the turtle. Sometimes, the best way to really serve is to listen to someone, to hear their story, to really understand their need. Sometimes, the best way to really serve is cooking a big meal for some hungry people. The story of Mary and Martha is not about one being better than the other—listening or doing. The story reminds us of the importance of relationships, of knowing another so we can really know how to serve them.

When I was a kid, women in my church would actually say things like, “Oh, you're such a Martha!” Besides just being weird, they completely missed the point of the story because it's not an *either* Mary *or* Martha story. Jesus calls us to be both—Mary *and* Martha—to listen and to do. May it be so with us. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gloria Steinem. *My Life on the Road*, New York: Random House, 2016, pg. 177.