

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

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I can be a little bit of a neat freak – a cleaning fanatic – and don't ask me why, but I was visiting a website dedicated to sensible housecleaning solutions when I stumbled upon the following tips with the title "Martha's Way vs. Mary's Way":

Martha's way: Now look what you can do with Alka-Seltzer! Clean a toilet. Drop in two Alka-Seltzer tablets, wait twenty minutes, brush and flush. The citric acid and effervescent action clean vitreous china. Clean a vase. To remove a stain from the bottom of a glass vase or cruet, fill with water and drop in two Alka-Seltzer tablets. Polish jewelry. Drop two Alka-Seltzer tablets into a glass of water and immerse the jewelry for two minutes. Clean a thermos bottle. Fill the bottle with water, drop in four Alka-Seltzer tablets, and let soak for an hour (or longer, if

necessary). **Mary's way:** Put your jewelry, vases, and thermos in the toilet. Add some Alka-Seltzer and you have solved a whole bunch of problems at once.¹

Mary and Martha, Martha and Mary – two sisters – one listening to the teacher, the other preparing food and hospitality for the teacher – one hearing, one doing – one woman praised, the other scolded. What was Jesus thinking? This text is a landmine for the preacher!

Let's look at the text again, this time through the poet's lens: Picture Mary sitting attentively, praised for her intellectual curiosity and Martha...

[Martha] scolded like an impolite child
stopped in mid gesture
with a wooden spoon in one hand
while a bowl falls
from the other;
hidden in the dimness of the pantry
under a candelabra of spider webs
she is ashamed in the glow of the kitchen fire...
humble and apologetic
but disobedient she still continues to serve
heart in a rush of love²

How many of you out there have siblings? A brother? A sister? Both? I'm sure that I'm not the only one who's perfectly aware that Jesus' comments in this reading would've gone a long way in fueling quite a fire between these sisters: both fervent, one criticized for choosing the conventional role of providing food and hospitality, the other praised for choosing simply to sit and to listen. It's interesting though, isn't it, Jesus reaction? After all, he

¹ "Martha's Way vs. Mary's Way." Sensible-house-cleaning-solutions.com: <http://www.sensible-house-cleaning-solutions.com/cleaning-jokes.html>

² Anna Kamienska. "Saint Mary," Biola.edu, March 14, 2017: <https://ccca.biola.edu/lent/2017/lent-2017-mar-14>.

was an unexpected guest in these women's home and he did travel with an entourage of twelve grown men who didn't know day to day where their next meal would come from. On the one hand, Jesus – an itinerant preacher, a traveling talker – Jesus needed an audience. On the other hand, he brought part of that audience with him and they were hungry and needed to be fed! Quite a conundrum for the two women who were to be both his hosts and his hearers.

I don't mean to belabor this, but I'm still a little shocked by Jesus' response to Martha. I can imagine what I might have said if I were Martha, "Well, Jesus Christ, I guess I'll stop making food to feed the hungry and just listen to you whine about them!" Jesus could've been more sensitive don't you think. He could have offered to get up and help her with the preparations himself. He could have defied social convention by serving in the kitchen the same way Mary defied convention by sitting with the men. But we don't hear Jesus offering to help. In fact, we don't even hear him offering to grab take-out so no one has to work and their undivided attention can be placed on him!

We're mid-westerners and we value hard work. I'm a minister so I value having an audience. I mean if everyone were doing stuff all the time, who'd be here to listen to this sermon? At the same time, as people of faith we're compelled to act for good in the world! At this point, I hope you can see why this text is a landmine!

To be honest, I think we know that if all of us sit and listen all of the time, nothing would ever get done. Conversely, if all of us stay busy all of the time, we would never have time to enjoy the beauty around us, to nurture important relationships, or to nurture our own spirits. Our scriptures are full of examples of texts that counter Jesus' words to Martha. As James famously wrote, "Be doers of the word and not just hearers." Jesus himself, in our text last week about the compassionate Samaritan, lifted up the value of serving

those in need and not just listening to their cries for help. Our text this morning should not be regarded as the final word on the superiority of hearing over doing. Instead, this is a text about one of them, becoming a barrier to doing the other; of doing becoming a barrier to hearing and listening becoming a barrier to doing.

It's easy to convince ourselves that being busy is the right way to be. St. Benedict once wrote that "idleness is the enemy of the soul." I think it's possible to take that a bit too much to heart. Sometimes I wonder if our busy-ness can be a mask for the subconscious uncertainty of what might happen if we were to stop what we're doing and started to listen. When we learn of tragedy or hardship in the world we can immediately default to raising money for a cause, taking a collection, or starting a program, and these are good things when they are coupled with opening ourselves to learning about the situation, to hearing the stories that prompt our actions, to investing in authentic relationships.

While we don't intend it as such, we can have the erroneous tendency to care for the needs of others while still keeping them at a distance – building a house with out understanding the causes of homelessness, serving soup without offering a conversation or a kind word, writing a check without righting the wrong. Please don't get me wrong, focusing exclusively on the flipside of this busy-ness coin, the so-called "Mary side" of listening and empathizing and internalizing – focusing all our attention on listening alone is certainly equally if not more disastrous.

Our text this morning points to the risk of a one-or-the-other approach to living and calls us to embody a balance of word and work, of going and doing, and sitting and listening. Living lives of service and love in the world should be coupled with nourishing our relationships with one another and tending to our own spiritual center. Contrary to the polemic in the reading, there is really no *better* part. It takes both. Amen.