

When Jesus entered the village, he went to Mary and Martha's place. Where else would he go? Everyone went to Mary and Martha's place. They were the hostesses with the moistest! Martha's lemon bars were the stuff of legend! (You laugh, but lemons are grown in Palestine.)

We know Mary and Martha. We identify with them. They symbolize two paths of Christian devotion; Mary, the woman of study and prayer, the quiet contemplative who wants nothing more than to sit at Jesus' feet and listen; and, Martha, the woman of action, the servant who sees the need and is energized to meet the need.

We know Mary and Martha. We need Mary and Martha, so what do we make of Jesus' response to Martha's concerns, *Luke 10:41-42 (NRSV)* "*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.*"<sup>1</sup>

Jesus sounds rather patronizing; I can almost imagine him patting her on the head and saying, "Tut, tut, don't you fret, someday when you get what the spiritual life is really about, you won't be in such a dither. Don't worry. Mary and I will pray for you."

And Jesus never had another lemon bar again.

So what are to make of Mary and Martha? What is "the better part" that Mary chose? What is Jesus inviting us to choose?

## ● MARY AND MARTHA

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We know Mary and Martha. We identify with them. We see ourselves in them, and that's where things can become a bit confusing. We can see so much of ourselves in Mary and Martha that we lose sight of Mary and Martha, and the question shifts from, "what is Jesus saying to these particular women in this particular encounter" to "what is Jesus saying in general to me about me?"

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

I read a lot of that this week. Folks who identified with Mary read this story one way. Folks who identified with Martha read the story another way. What all of these readings had in common is that we read this as the story of Mary or Martha. We read this as a story about two ways of being a Christian, as a contest between a Christian life of service versus a Christian life of prayer with Jesus declaring the life of prayer as the ultimate winner.

Holy Charlie Sheen! Is the story about Mary and Martha about “winning?”

No, we’ve fallen into the trap of a false dichotomy. We’ve read this story as “either/or,” either Mary or Martha, when Jesus is for both Mary and Martha. We’ve turned a word of mercy, grace, and abiding love into a word of judgment, condemnation, and rejection.

We’re good at that. We’re good at turning Jesus into an unforgiving, unrelenting judge. But as Easter draws nigh, please remember Christmas. Remember that Jesus is God in human flesh; God embracing our life that has limits and frustrations and struggles; God embracing our life that is sometimes taken out of our hands by forces beyond our control; our life where somebody has to cook dinner and somebody has to do the dishes because they won’t do them themselves. So Jesus isn’t choosing Mary over Martha. He isn’t affirming the life of prayer over the life of service. There’s more to this story; this isn’t the story of Mary or Martha; it’s the story of Mary and Martha.

### ● THE BETTER PART

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There is more to the story of Mary and Martha than meets the eye. We see this as a story of human doings; Mary does this; Martha does that; Jesus likes what Mary does more than Martha; end of story.

Listen again to what Jesus says: *Luke 10:41-42 (NRSV) “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.”*<sup>2</sup>

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Jesus isn't addressing what Martha is doing; he is concerned about how she is doing; he's concerned about her "being." She is "worried and distracted." Three times in these 4 verses, Martha is described by words that express her being stressed-out and anxious.

Is she stressed out and anxious because Jesus has suddenly appeared on her doorstep and now she has to play the hostess with the most-est? Is she stressed out and anxious because she knows how much food is in the cupboard, how much is left in the food budget, and how much it's going to take to feed this crowd? Is she stressed out and anxious because there's a lot of work in putting a good meal, a meal she can be proud of, on the table, and Mary's just sitting there soaking it all in?

Could be; pick the one that would make you the most stressed out and anxious, because Jesus' concern is simply that Martha not be stressed out and anxious. Jesus is inviting Martha to choose to see her work in a different way; to focus on the one thing that matters; to choose the better part that will not be taken away.

Here's the challenge; how can we be involved in service and not lose our souls? How can we be trying to make a difference and not give in to anger and hate? We see what Terry Jones, the pastor in Florida, has done in burning a Koran? How can we not become that guy? We have a budget; among the cuts are millions of dollars for malaria nets. We can do the math. Millions of nets prevent a certain number of cases; a percentage of those cases will be fatal. Based on the numbers; that cut will cost the lives of 70,000 children. How do we not give in to despair?

We choose the better part. We choose the love of God that will not be taken away.

Brother Lawrence's little classic *Practicing the Presence of God* illustrates what choosing "the better part" looks like. In his Maxims, Lawrence writes, "Men invent means and methods of coming at God's love, they learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God's presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of him?"

For Brother Lawrence, "common business," no matter how mundane or routine, could be a medium of God's love. The sacredness or worldly status of a task mattered less than motivation behind it. "Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do. . . We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying

on the pan for love of him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God."

Brother Lawrence felt having a proper heart about tasks made every detail of his life possess surpassing value. "I began to live as if there were no one save God and me in the world." Brother Lawrence felt that he cooked meals, ran errands, scrubbed pots, and endured the scorn of the world alongside God. One of his most famous sayings refers to his kitchen:

"The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things; I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.<sup>3</sup>

The love of God is the better part that will not be taken away from us. Jesus offers his love in every moment of every day. When we choose to see life's surprises, life's inconveniences and discomforts as opportunities to experience and express God's love, we choose the better part. We overcome the distractions that lure us to focus on lesser things, distractions that lead to being stressed-out and anxious; and instead focus on the one thing – the love of God that will never be taken away.

How are you doing? Jesus cares. Jesus cares if you are stressed-out and anxious. Jesus cares, and in the story of Mary and Martha he invites you to look at your life in a new way. Instead of allowing worries and distractions to make your life a reign of terror, practice the presence of God. Focus on the one thing that will never be taken away; God's love is always there for us. With God, there is peace. With God, there is hope. With God, there is a way. "Martha, Martha, Mary, Mary, don't be worried and distracted by many things, remember I love you. Choose the better part." Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brother\\_Lawrence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brother_Lawrence)