

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

Mary and Martha. Here we go again. We have all heard this story many times and I find that it still has great potency to stir the heart. Given how many of us find our summer days filled with a steady flow of family members and friends visiting, we are probably primed to connect with the characters in our text. Some of you may be in a seemingly endless pattern of making beds and washing sheets, buying the groceries you know particular people will enjoy, prepping the garden to make sure it looks nice, running to the dump with the extra trash, and planning activities so people can enjoy the area. There can be something deeply satisfying about offering thoughtful hospitality and seeing others enjoy themselves. However, such visits, while fun, can be quite exhausting.

Then there is that part of you that recognizes that worrying about controlling all the details to perfection just might get in the way of actually enjoying the people you were hoping to spend time with. Your mind is on the extra fruit or eggs you need to buy or you notice that this or that item isn't ironed well enough or that the flowers you had bought for the occasion already don't look as fresh as you'd like. Before you know it, you somehow lost touch with the flow of the conversation you had looked forward to. Or there you are trying to make the hors d'oeuvres just right and are stuck in the kitchen while others are having all the fun. Oh, and there are those people who don't pitch when you think they should. They are enjoying conversations or games or the view with your visitors and a part of you gets the occasional impulse to send that glare or just maybe kick their shin under the table when the occasion presents itself.

When discussing this Gospel passage, I have been struck by how many people begin to wonder to what extent they might actually disempower others to help. Maybe that's because of their own need to have things 'just so' that leaves others in fear of failing. Maybe, to some extent, it is our own tendency to jump in and take care of everything, routinely coupled with an inability to actually ask for what we need. Many people tend to acknowledge that they learned these roles and behaviors early and don't know how to change them. But, when all is said and done, somebody has to feed people and somebody has to do the dishes, right?

Given how well acquainted we are with these conundrums, we can acknowledge that there is something wonderfully human about our story about Mary and Martha. Since they are sisters, there is even a bit of that sibling rivalry added in. Both of them love Jesus as their teacher and friend and rejoice that he is coming to visit with them. We might forget in today's context that it was more than unusual or even taboo to have a man visit two women with whom he is not officially related. The fact that Mary is sitting at the feet of a revered teacher is also highly unusual for the culture and times. The cultural expectation clearly would have situated both women in the kitchen. The fact that Jesus treated her as he would any disciple is an example of the high regard Jesus had for women and the ways in which he was willing to overcome cultural and religious boundaries. The story in part shows how God is as accessible to woman to the same extent as men. This is a revolutionary gesture and teaching in Jesus day all by itself! Note also that Jesus resists being turned into the hierarchical male authority figure who gets to tell Mary to go do her work. We don't know whether Martha is just not comfortable talking directly with her sister or assuming that Jesus as the male should call the shots. Jesus will not be triangulated and is not interested in the enforcement of roles. He loves them both.

Does Jesus simply dismiss Martha in her role of service when he says, *“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?”* I don't think Jesus was dismissing her or her desire to make him feel welcome and cared for. What jumps out at me is the undercurrent of anxiety and separation in Martha. I wonder if a part of her was trying to make herself

acceptable and lovable or could not quite yet believe that she, too, was worthy of serving in any role beyond what she was used to.

Having said that, is Jesus saying that sitting at his feet and contemplating his every word is somehow superior to preparing a meal in the active life? There were quite a few interpreters in the history of Christianity who loved this text for just this reason. They thought that while labor was necessary, this text proved that it was not to be ranked as high or as beneficial as a life of prayer and meditation. But even living a life of prayer can be driven by anxiety and a desire to earn love or achieve some rapturous experience of God as though God were removed from our actual lives.

There were also some theologians like Gregory the Great who, as long ago as the sixth century CE, saw this story as an affirmation of what they called the *"vita ambidextra."* Ambidextrous people can use both hands equally well. This means for our context that action and contemplation go together. They are our left and right hand so to speak and we will thrive more if we learn to use both. Doing active work is necessary and good. Spending time in silence and awe, engaging God's word are necessary and good. Whether they become a source of strength or a hindrance has to do with our own sense of presence and motivation. For example, I will never forget how my former brother-in-law returned from a three-day peace conference in Berlin and said he had never felt so aggressive and angry in his life as at that conference on peace. I think what he was unwittingly reflecting is that if our desire for action is not deeply grounded in the deeper love and mercy of God and our fellow beings, we can quickly become disillusioned and angry. Likewise, if our contemplation/meditation does not also issue forth loving action, we may just be doing self-preoccupied navel gazing that bears no fruit.

I wonder whether the one thing needed, according to Jesus, is to live and act out of a deep trust in God's love and care that need not be earned, no matter what we are doing or "being" at a given moment. Maybe it also has to do with trusting that God meets us in whatever we are doing. I would like to tell you a story to illustrate this. Brie Stoner is a staff member at the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which was founded by

Richard Rohr. She was also a student in the “Living School.” I will always remember the story she told at the first symposium I attended as a new student in the “Living School.” The school seeks to recover the interconnectedness between action and contemplation. We are encouraged to develop spiritual practices to stay grounded in God while also serving in action grounded in God’s love as an incarnational mystical, that is, lived and embodied presence and experience of God. The assumption is that God is not separate from our lives and waiting to be wooed or appeased. Rather, God is constantly present in and, in many ways, as our life.

During her first residential sessions at the school, Brie was a young mother of a toddler and a nine-month old baby. She was enjoying the quiet of the contemplative prayer sits while away from home but also had to “pump and dump” during breaks to keep the milk flowing, if you know what I mean. Those moments were a potent reminder that her life at home simply did not afford her the time and space to sit in silence. She became more and more agitated. Here is what happened next in her own words:

Finally, during one of James Finley’s [core faculty member] sessions I couldn’t take it anymore. “Jim, can we talk about how much harder all of this is when I’m back home? Because I get up sometimes at 5:00 a.m., desperate to have one prayer sit, and it’s like my kids have radar and inevitably one of them wakes up ten minutes later. I mean, where is the icon of the mystic with one baby on the hip, a toddler crying at their feet, cooking dinner with one hand, trying to finish work on a laptop with the other? Because that’s my real life.”

Jim said, “Ok, you be you and I’ll be God. And since I’m God, I’m watching you get up exhausted every morning, and I’m so touched that you want to spend this time with me. Really, I am! It just means the world to me. The thing is, I just can’t bear how much I love you. It’s too much! And so at a certain point I rush into the bodies of your children and wake them up because. . . .”

Jim paused. “Because I want to know what it feels like to be held by you.”

Yes, the interruption is the presence of God that I was so desperately trying to access in moments of stillness and silence. With or without the luxury of stillness and silence, God comes

to us disguised as our very lives (as Paula D'Arcy has said). In my case, Jim helped me to discover how my path as an exhausted young parent was the monastery of my own transformation.

As I remembered Brie's story, I was also thinking about Jules. Perhaps there was God in Jules' touching our lives and that of many creatures that felt in some way bereft or on the margins. Sadly, it seems that deep old wounds made it easier for her to give such love than to bathe in it. But it was also God in and through all of you that also allowed her to, at least at times, know what it means to be loved and embraced. Our paths crossed for a precious time that no one can take away. May our faith in God as we know it revealed in the Christ in our centered Mary moments anchor us now enough to go on loving and risking ourselves in grounded Martha human acts of loving service. May we go on to live less anxious and more ambidextrous lives in which the power and presence of Mary and Martha at their best meld together into a potent presence living out God's love right where we are planted.