

Choosing The Better Part, with Martha and Mary

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Hello everyone, I'm Karen May, and I'm here today to talk to you about the story of Martha and Mary. You know the one, the one where Martha is working so hard, and Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus. Martha complains and Jesus tells her, Mary has the better part. So, we're going to learn today that this is not a story about denying our service or stopping our work. It is going to show us how attending to the Word of God brings grace and meaning to our service, and we'll discover that the better part is not limited to a stationary position.

Opening Prayer

Let us pray. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Sweet Jesus, I thank you for the ways that you draw us to your feet, the ways that you come into our hearts, that you bless our work with your peace and with your grace. I thank you for the time that each person today is spending with you, whether it is sitting or whether it is in the process of the work that they are doing. I ask you to bless them in it. I thank you Lord, for all of your graces, amen. And of the Father and of the Son and of The Holy Spirit, Amen.

Luke Chapter 10:38-42

So this story is in the gospel of Luke chapter 10, verses 38 through 42. So let's read this so that we know what we're talking about. It says,

"As they," excuse me, "As they continued their journey, He entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed Him." This is Jesus. "She had a sister named Mary who sat beside the Lord at his feet, listening to Him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving came to Him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do the serving? Tell her to help me.' The Lord said to her in reply, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her.'"

Identifying with Martha and Understanding Mary

Now, I know this story for me has a lot of challenges. I am the oldest of four, I have four children. There is a lot to do, there's a lot of responsibility that comes with that kind of position, a lot of expectations, and so I identify a lot with Martha, and I understand that frustration, that irritation, that being overwhelmed with busyness. And then at the same time, I'm drawn to Mary. To be able to sit at the feet of Jesus, even talking about it right now, brings me this peace. I would love to just sit at the feet of Jesus, but I have all these other things to do, like Martha. So why is this story drawing me? Why is this story here?

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I'm confused, because the Lord says, "*Martha, Mary has the better part.*" Like, she's not going to get up and help you. And that's a little frustrating. Like, Lord, I came to you, I need help. And He says something different. So, what is this story saying? How are we supposed to interpret this?

Well, I would say that we're looking at it a little bit backwards. A lot of the studies on Martha and Mary really talk about putting away your Martha and really becoming a Mary, like Martha is kind of a bad word and Mary is the good way to be.

And I've done several studies on this, and I've never gotten through them, because I'm too busy, and because something about it just doesn't ring true. Again, as a mother of four, if somebody's not doing the laundry or taking care of the children or cooking dinner, it doesn't get done, so the house is filthy, the children are a disaster, and everyone's crying cause they're hungry. So, the work needs to be done, and I can't put away my Martha. I need to do the work.

And this story, when you look at it in context, doesn't really say that. The story before this is the story of the good Samaritan. So, the person who is keeping himself holy, who is staying clean and going to the temple and not helping the person who has been beaten on the side of the road is not doing the right thing. The good Samaritan who stops and picks this person up out of the muck and the dirt and takes him to an inn and pays for his care, that is the person who has loved his neighbor.

The Real Problem

When Jesus washes the feet of his apostles, he says, "As I have done, so you must also do. I have served you; you must serve each other." And so the service is not the problem. The problem is you've forgotten that there's need of only one thing. The problem is we've forgotten who we're serving.

I do it all the time. I know Thanksgiving for me used to be quite a challenge. We used to go to my family's house, and I never had to cook until my oldest child was in college, and then all of a sudden I'm having to cook. I don't know how to cook a turkey, and as I've done it, I don't do it very well.

But I have these expectations, as I imagine Martha did. Can you imagine having Jesus coming into your house, He's already well-known, He's known as an amazing teacher, probably the Messiah, and He's coming to your house. The expectations are huge from the world around her, but I'm sure from Martha herself.

And so, then as I go into Thanksgiving, I have this big expectation, because I've grown up with this amazing table full of delicious food for our Thanksgiving, and as I'm trying to create that table, my family is out playing or they're watching football and I'm in there not really knowing how to make a turkey, it's not going so well, and all of these other things happening. I'm so busy and I'm so frustrated, and I'm just glaring at my family, resentful that they aren't helping me, even though I didn't ask them, and even if they asked, I wouldn't know where to put them.

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So, unlike Martha, I didn't go to anybody. I didn't go to Jesus, I didn't go to them. I just sat and resented. Martha, on the other hand, skips right over Mary. She doesn't go to her sister. She goes straight to Jesus and says, "Lord, make her help me." Now, this is not the only time that Jesus is asked to join into a family squabble. There's a young man that comes to him and says, "Lord, make my brother split the inheritance with me." And each time, Jesus does not address the problem. He skips right over it. He finds the source of the person's unhappiness, and with Martha, that's what he does. He tells her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing."

You've forgotten why you're serving. You've forgotten who you're serving. And so, Mary does have the better part. Mary is not here as a character in herself, she is a complete contrast to Martha. She never says anything. She's just here as an example. So, she needs, Martha, needs to come to the feet of Jesus to remember who she's serving.

And when I finally came to that, after my frustration and my irritation and saying, why am I doing this, who am I serving, and realized I'm doing this because I want to spend time with my family at Thanksgiving, and I'm serving this family that I love, that I don't get to see very often, because we don't all live in the same place.

And so, I need to do things in a way that incorporates them and that helps us to enjoy each other. We don't make turkey anymore. So, and then I have people bring something, like you're going to bring this dish, you're going to bring that, and then we're all going to cook this dish together, because we love to cook together, and then we're going to play together, or we're going to watch football together, and we're going to spend this time together, because I've remembered who I'm serving and why I'm serving. And through that, I am serving Christ, and that's the thing we need to remember, that we can bring grace and meaning into the work that we do. And you can see that that happens through that peace and that joy and that love that comes when we're doing it.

Incorporating Work and Prayer

When you are irritated, when you are anxious, when you are frustrated, we've forgotten the one thing. And so how do we do that in our busy lives? How do we incorporate the sitting at the feet of Jesus when we've got carpool to run and we've got laundry to do, and we've got work to do?

And I love St. Francis De Sales for this. He has a book called "The Introduction to the Devout Life," which is a series of letters to a lay woman at the time that he was alive, and she would love to have been a religious sister, but she couldn't. She was married, she had a family, she had a household to run. But she really wanted to be able to live this life of faith. And St. Francis De Sales said this is not limited to people who live a religious life, who have been consecrated for that sitting at the feet of Jesus.

And so, you need to incorporate that into your life. You can set some time aside and have practices throughout your day that allow you to connect with Jesus, you can incorporate it into the work that you do. And one thing that I love that he says is that you need to listen to your spiritual director. As a spiritual director, I think that's great advice, and I would tell you, get a spiritual director. Find someone who can help you to refocus and to bring Jesus into every aspect

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of your life, or really, to find how Jesus is a part of your life. I love being able to do that with people. When they tell me, you know, I don't have this faith life that I should have.

We have these expectations of what that should be. I have to get up at 5:30, I have to do a daily rosary, I have to, you know, pray an hour every day. And I love being able to show them how, when they're walking and listening to an inspirational podcast, that's part of their holy hour. When I'm running and praying the rosary, that's part of my holy hour. And so, with all of these things, our expectations can get in the way of the ways that we're really sitting at the feet of Jesus.

The Benedictines know this well, when they say that ora and labora are a key to their rules, praying and working. They don't need to be separated. And so, when you were feeling anxious, when you are feeling irritated, listen to Jesus say to you, "Mary Mary, Karen Karen, Julie Julie. you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing." Don't forget who you are serving, and when you serve that way, the peace that surpasses all understanding will fill your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The Kitchen Prayer

So, as we close, I want to leave you with this beautiful kitchen prayer by Klara Munkres that I think says what we've been talking about so beautifully.

"Lord of all the pots and pans and things, since I've not time to be a Saint by and doing lovely things or watching late with thee or dreaming in the dawn light or storming heaven's gates, make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates. Although I must have Martha's hands, I have a Mary mind, and when I black the boots and shoes, thy sandals, Lord, I find. I think of how they trod the earth, what time I scrub the floor. Accept this meditation Lord, I haven't time for more. Warm all the kitchen with thy love and light it with thy peace. Forgive me all my worrying and make my grumbling cease. Thou who didst love to give men food in room or by the sea, accept this service that I do, I do it unto thee."

We don't need to eliminate our Marthas, we don't need to get rid of our Marthas. We need to invite her in. We need to be gentle with her. We need to put some Marys into our Marthas, and in that way, find peace and grace and meaning in the work that we do.

St. Mary of Bethany, pray for us, St. Martha of Bethany, pray for us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

God bless