

“Look Who’s Coming to Dinner” – July 21, 2019 – Luke 10:38-42

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Today’s story from Luke’s gospel describes an event that took place when Jesus and his disciples arrived in a village and were welcomed into the home of a woman named Martha. This story about two sisters, Mary and Martha might be familiar to some of you, even before I read it to the kids!

Jesus and his disciples went into the home. When Jesus began to teach, Mary sat at his feet to listen and learn from him. This is an unexpected posture for a woman, because by doing this, she is assuming the role of a disciple. In this culture, she has no business sitting at Jesus’ feet. That is not her place. From the Jewish Mishnah come these words “Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst...but talk not much with womankind.” Mary was clearly out of place. And furthermore, she was neglecting her cultural duty by not helping her sister prepare the meal. She was also bringing shame upon the household because of her violation of a clear social boundary.

In the next verse, we read that Martha was distracted by her many tasks. Because of the importance of her guests and their unexpected arrival, Martha was hurrying to put together a nice meal. She was angry because her sister Mary was not helping her. In her frustration Martha came to Jesus and in effect, told him, “Look, I am trying to follow the rules of hospitality here and prepare a fine meal for you and your disciples. My misguided sister has ignored our customs by hanging out with you men folk when she should be in the kitchen helping me! Would you please explain this to her send her in?”

And this is the moment of truth. Will Jesus indeed follow the societal regulations and dismiss Mary from hearing his teachings? Will he send her off to the kitchen to do women’s work? Jesus turns to his distraught hostess, and sighs. “Martha, Martha, you are so caught up in doing works, you are missing out on what is really important. Your sister has chosen to listen and to learn from me. She has made the better choice, and I won’t let that be taken away from her.”

In this situation, Jesus had the opportunity to cement the societal expectations of gender roles. But as usual, he went against the status quo. He allowed Mary to continue to sit at his feet. He allowed her to take on the role of a disciple, even though she was a woman. He had a habit of breaking down barriers that caused division between various groups of people within society.

For him, the image of the Kingdom of God was one in which the members loved God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and loved their neighbors as themselves. In this Kingdom

there could be no room for injustice, restrictions or oppressions against any group. The Kingdom that Christ envisioned was a kingdom without barriers, distinctions, or boundaries between its members. There is equality and balance between the members. All members are equally important, and no member is any better or any worse than anyone else.

But there's another, deeper lesson to be learned from this interaction between Jesus, Mary and Martha. There was nothing innately wrong with Martha's desire to serve Jesus a meal. In fact, this act of service to Jesus and his disciples is actually a good thing. We are called to serve one another. So why does it seem like Jesus is rebuking Martha? Well, the issue here is her state of mind.

The text tells us that Martha was distracted by her many tasks. She was so caught up in the doing of deeds, that she lost sight of why she was doing them. She lost her focus. She was focused more on her anger at her sister than on her act of loving service for Jesus. Jesus told her, "Martha, you are worried and anxious about many things. Only one thing is needed." And what was that one thing that Jesus was referring to? Well, he pointed to Mary. Martha's sister was sitting at his feet, listening to his voice, and hearing the word of God. She was focusing on him and being nourished in her spirit. She was being fed, not by the physical food that Martha was preparing, but by the words of Jesus. As it is written in the Book of Deuteronomy, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

The deeper lesson here is the need for balance. There has to be balance between our outward service to others and our inward need for spiritual renewal. Some people get caught up in doing good works. They get involved with many good causes and always seem to be helping others. But sometimes they neglect their need to refuel. They forget to slow down and recharge their spiritual batteries. And if this goes on too long, they will begin to experience anxiety and restlessness. Or maybe even a sense of futility. Like Martha, they may start to gripe that others seem to be slacking off. "There's work to be done! Am I the only one who sees that?" Resentment grows and obscures the positive part of serving. In time burnout will occur. Jesus sees that very thing happening to Martha, and so he tells her, she needs to look at her sister Mary, who has chosen to sit at his feet to focus on him and to renew her spirit.

There is a time to do, and there is a time to be.

As much as we might try to be, we are not spiritual superheroes. We cannot simply live a life of service to the Kingdom of God, without also having our spirits renewed. There is that need for balance. As we grow on the inside, we can better serve on the outside. There is a time to do and a time to be.

The church is a place for both. It is in this community of faith that we are to reach out to others in need, to be of service to our neighbors and to one another, to stand up for the rights of those who are marginalized and those who are oppressed, and to put aside those barriers that divide us. It is through this community that we learn to serve.

And it is in this community that we are fed. We find our spiritual renewal through worship, prayer, and communion with God and one another. We receive nurture and support from those who love and care about us. We come to this place and fellowship with these people, and together we sit with one another at the feet of Jesus Christ, longing to hear his word to us. It is here that we learn to both do and be.

When we strive to seek a balance in who we are as children of God, created equally in God's image, we can take on the best qualities of both Mary and Martha and apply them to our lives. Like Martha, we can develop our ability to serve and take care of the needs of our neighbors. Like Mary, we can recognize the need to refuel ourselves spiritually, knowing that without the word of Christ to nourish us, our service is simply empty action. Learning to find balance in doing and in being. That is what is needed.