



“Sitting at the Feet of Jesus”
Scripture – Luke 10:38-42
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, July 28, 2019

Whenever I hear this text, my first thought is to rush to Martha’s defense. After all, she is knocking herself out for *his* benefit. Jesus shows up at Mary and Martha’s front door with no advance warning, and with several of his crew in tow. In a split second, Martha throws herself into high gear. She scoops up the papers that were spread out on the table. She grabs a jar of beans, a bottle of olive oil, and an assortment of spices, and begins whipping up her to-die-for hummus. She slices cucumbers and cuts pita bread in these cute little triangles. She pulls out bottles of wine and washes every glass they own. She is faithfully following the Torah’s command to extend hospitality.

Meanwhile, Jesus and his tag alongs are pouring through the front door like the running of the bulls in Pamplona. Once the stampede concludes and the dust settles, Jesus is settled into the favored chair and everyone is bunched around him. Martha’s sister, Mary, is perched at his feet as he begins telling stories and sharing his wisdom.

I picture Martha with an artificial smile plastered on her face speaking through clenched teeth, “Mary, my dear sister, Mary. Could I see you in the kitchen for a moment?” Martha wants Mary to step away from Jesus for a minute to strap an apron on her. But that’s not what Martha does. Maybe she’s concerned that if she pulls Mary aside, the two will get into a row and totally embarrass themselves.

So, instead, Martha chooses a more powerful tactic. Instead of confronting Mary directly, she tries to coax Jesus into doing her work for her. Ah yes, let’s try a little triangulation. Martha says, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to give me a hand.”

But Jesus does not comply. He says, “Martha, take a breath. In fact, breathe in, breathe out; breathe in, breathe out. Let it go.”

All right, Jesus does not really say that, but that’s the gist of what he says. Martha is anxious about making her guests comfortable and she’s flitting around preparing a meal, but she is missing the main course. Jesus says that by sitting and listening to his teachings, “Mary has chosen the better part.”

Imagine how Martha felt at that moment. The words of Jesus must have pierced her like a dagger thrust into her heart.

The words of Jesus are startling. He has constantly told his followers about the importance of loving and serving others. He made it clear that he was not interested in lip service. He chastised religious leaders for performing

rituals and obeying the law, but not loving their neighbor. He talked about the importance of treating others the way we want to be treated. And yet, when Martha throws herself into extending hospitality to Jesus and his entourage, and Mary passively sits on the floor, Jesus says that Mary has made the better choice.

What's up with this story? What is its message?

Professor Tom Long points out that some interpreters of this text think that Luke may have had a hidden agenda. They suggest that Luke is perturbed that some women in the early church are overstepping their bounds. Women are thrusting themselves into leadership positions and so Luke tells this story of Jesus criticizing Martha for working and taking charge, and he praises Mary for being silent and passive. These interpreters believe Luke is trying to put women back in their quiet and obedient places. However, this idea doesn't hold up against the evidence. There are several examples in Luke's gospel of women not being passive. They are smart and they are admired. The best example is when Luke tells us Jesus' parable about the poor widow who was so unrelenting in her demand for justice that she prompted a powerful male judge to cave in to her demands.

When this story of Mary and Martha circulated in first century Palestine, it was Mary who stood out as the one who was jilting her expected role and shattering a deeply engrained tradition. Men were considered worthy of learning, women were not. In the time of Jesus, rabbinical teaching declared, "Let your house be a meeting place for Sages. Sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst...[but] do not talk much with a woman."¹

When Jesus said that Mary had chosen the right thing by sitting with the men and absorbing his teachings, he was ditching the doctrine that women were to remain unschooled. He was kicking decorum in the teeth, refusing to conform to a code that claimed that only men could grasp the metaphors of a master. Jesus was touting Mary for being brash. He was saying the first century equivalent of "You go, girl!"

A colleague says she wishes Jesus would have gone a step further. She wishes Jesus would have gathered up his male disciples and marched them into the kitchen and directed them to bake the bread and chop the vegetables and set the table. Maybe if Jesus had made his point more explicitly, "his followers would not have wasted the next 2,000 years arguing over a woman's rightful place in the church."² It is unmistakable that Jesus did not go along with his culture's view of women. He respected women and wanted them to know that in God's eyes they are smart and gifted and worthy and equal to men.

Something else is going on in this story. The sisters represent two different ways of approaching faith. Martha represents action, Mary represents contemplation. But does Jesus really favor worship over feeding the hungry? Does he favor prayer over working for justice?

Surely we cannot allow this one story to diminish the many other stories in the gospels of Jesus calling us to action. The Christian faith is not a navel-gazing faith. God calls us to combat evil with good and to vanquish the darkness with light.

Living in a time as we do, when hate-filled racism is encouraged by the highest office in the land, when the opioid crisis is snuffing out lives by the minute, when the number of desperate refugees is at an all-time high, when the planet is overheating and 100 year floods are becoming routine, when there are countless hungry and homeless in our own community, it seems like we should focus *solely* on action and leave worship, prayer, and reflection to people who are too feeble to act and to those secluded in monasteries and convents.

There can be no doubt that Jesus calls us to action. He expressly calls us to feed those who are hungry, to care for those who are ill, to welcome the stranger, and to love others as ourselves – regardless of race, religion, sexual

orientation, or gender. However, every action draws its lifeblood from sitting at the feet of Jesus and being nourished by him.

Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and listens. Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” He says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” He says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”

Mary soaks in his teachings and thereby receives the nourishment and the encouragement, the illumination and the inspiration to live the rich and exciting adventure God wants her to live. After receiving a transfusion of Christ-like love, she will be bursting with joy, and energized by hope. Worship, prayer, sacred music, and reflecting on the teachings of Jesus refresh and revitalize our souls so that we can be partners with God in healing the world and spreading the divine realm on earth.

A colleague told about a church youth group that took a mission trip to Jamaica. “On their trip they visited an elementary school, and they spent some time observing a classroom that was seriously overcrowded with children. The children were very poor, all of them needy and wiggly and noisy and unruly. It was a difficult learning environment; but the youth group marveled to see that the teacher carried herself with great calm and patience, treating each child with love and respect, despite the poverty and the chaos. The youth concluded that the only way she could do this was that she must really love being a teacher. But they were surprised when the teacher said to them, “Oh, I don't come here every day because I love teaching. I come here every day because I love Jesus, and I see Jesus in every one of these children.”

“It sounds as if that teacher had been like Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus. And because she had, she could get up like Martha and teach those children with joy and hope, seeing Jesus in the face of every one of them.”³

Isn't that why the relationships we have established with people in Guatemala have blossomed? Our ties run deep because we have not only helped to provide them with water filters and sanitary latrines and micro-loans, but we have worshiped together in their small sanctuaries and we have established prayer partnerships. These spiritual practices bind our souls together. Although we are separated by thousands of miles, we are sisters and brothers held together by our unity in Christ.

We do not cease from actively sharing God's love with others, but we must also constantly refresh our spirits, because our hands will tire from serving if our souls are undernourished.

NOTES

1. R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” *The New Interpreter's Bible: Luke and John, Volume IX*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 231.
2. Debie Thomas, “Only One Thing,” July 14, 2019.
3. Thomas G. Long, “Mary and Martha,” *Day1.org*, July 22, 2007.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Lord of our Hearts – From east and west, north and south, you call us together. So we come. We come to gather around a font and table that unite us. We come to sit with Mary at the feet of Jesus. We come to rest in your presence and drink deeply from the well of grace. We give thanks that you claim us in the waters of baptism, form and transform us by your Word, and bind us together as the body of Christ. Pour out your Spirit upon us, we pray, and sustain us for our common calling.

Some among us are suffering, O God. We lift before you those who grieve: those who have lost work and the security it brings; those who have lost loved ones and the joy of companionship; those who have lost hope and the courage to dream. We remember those whose bodies are weary or worn down, or aching from illness or disease; we remember those who suffer each day from anxiety or addiction. Breathe your Spirit upon all in need of healing, we pray, that they might know your peace and experience your wholeness. And breathe your Spirit upon us – stirring us toward compassion, that we might bring comfort to members of this body in need of care.

We rejoice in the ways your Spirit is at work among us — shaping us as disciples, binding us together as the body of Christ, and sending us out to be your hands and feet on earth. Guide us, O God, that we might serve you faithfully in this community, and throughout the world. We pray for your children in nearby neighborhoods and far-flung lands who yearn for your presence and peace. Be with those whose homelands are in turmoil due to natural disasters or political unrest; be with those who live each day in fear due to violence or hatred or oppression.

Commissioning God, you have called us to stand where Christ stood — with those on the margins, with those who mourn, with those who cry for justice. During this time we have set apart as sacred, open our minds and hearts to your wisdom and truth. Sustain us. Renew us. Transform us. Empower us ... So that we might rise from our place at the feet of Jesus ready to do your work in this world.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who taught us to pray together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.