

[\[Link to audio recording.\]](#)

There are certain stories, certain characters that capture our imagination. Think about some of the most popular TV shows and how people identify with the main characters. We watch the *Golden Girls* and decide if we are a Blanche, Dorothy, Rose or Sophia. We talk about *Friends* and know exactly who in our own circle of friends is Ross, Rachel, Joey, Chandler, Monica or Phoebe. Whenever stories strike a chord with us, we can't help but see ourselves in them, or try to figure out where we might fit in.

It's no different when we read the Bible, especially with familiar stories like this morning's reading about Mary and Martha. These two sisters are painted as opposites: the sister who does the "better" thing, who sits at the feet of Jesus to learn—and the sister who is preoccupied with doing the seemingly unimportant things like cooking and taking care of the household. It gets set up as a competition, as a comparison between these two.

I have a problem with that, mostly because, depending on my mood, I feel pretty definitively like Mary *or* like Martha. On days when I feel like I'm the only one doing *anything*, I definitely feel like Martha. It's like when I was a kid and my mom would ask me *and* my brother and sister to do something...but *I* would end up being the only one cleaning or setting the table while the two of them pretended not to hear or would continually call out, "I'll be there in a minute!" Of course, *I* was never the one slacking off... But I'm sure you've experienced that, too, right? It's the self-righteous feeling of "it's not fair!" So, when we hear Martha say to Jesus, "Tell her then to help me," it's not hard to identify with her.

But then there are other days when I am completely cheering for Mary. Mary *should* have been in the kitchen with Martha according to the customs of the day. The place at the teacher's feet, the place for learning about matters of the faith—this was a place for the men. The women were to prepare food and attend to the needs of the men. Instead, Mary realizes the import of this moment and flouts convention to listen to Christ. So, I must admit that there is a large part of me that cheers her on for going against these gendered, societal expectations.

Mary or Martha? Mary *vs.* Martha. Who do we support? Who comes out on top? They are always presented against each other instead of complementing each other.

It's natural, isn't it? This is what we do all the time. We are always putting ourselves in competitions with other people to see who gets the most praise, who has the most prominent position, who is paid the most. Our entire lives become about being the best or, if not the *best*, then at least *better* than someone else. It's exhausting, constantly trying to figure out how to get the upper hand or be held in higher regard.

Life is not designed to be a competition and perhaps this morning's story can help us understand that. I believe that it is *not* an either/or scenario. *Both* Mary and Martha's parts are important. Taking care of the household is an important and valued task: the Bible has many stories that highlight the value of hospitality—just take a look at this morning's reading from Genesis! Taking time to learn and listen to God is also vital. We need work *and* rest; we need caring for others *and* reflection and care for ourselves.

The same sort of thing is evidenced in our own lives. Depending on the hour, the day, the week, different attitudes are needed, and different things take our focus. Sometimes, that means we are doing a lot of tasks, checking things off a to-do box in our jobs, our families, or in our communities. Other times, that means we slow down a bit, set about listening and growing and learning...taking time to be still and pay close attention to what God might be doing.

A colleague of mine shared a story about Vacation Bible School at her church this. As the pastor, she wasn't completely hands-on in the process, but was still present and helped to tell the Bible Stories each day. To be honest, VBS is not one of her gifts. She has two kids and loves them dearly, but she finds her comfort level much more in working with adults, or even in silent meditation or study. The noise and chaos of kids running around drains her. Her typical mode of operating is not better or worse than that of the many volunteers who absolutely *love* VBS. We need both: we need people who can't wait to be in the middle of a group of excited kids and we need people who operate differently, who can teach us and lead us into more contemplative pursuits.

In the reading from Luke, Jesus says that Mary has chosen "the better part." Yes, it might be the better part, but I don't think it is necessarily the better part for all time. Maybe it's not about one thing being better than the other—maybe it's about knowing what the right thing is at the right time. In fact, the original language doesn't make this a comparison—it's not about "better" or "worse." Instead, it simply states that Mary chose the "good" part.

When I look at everything going on in the world around us, I am struck by the variety of ways we are called to respond.

We hear news of terrorist attacks. Wars. Shootings. An ongoing pandemic. Refugees struggling to find their way to a new home. Contaminated water. Shortages of food. Corrupt officials and politicians. Targeting of public servants. Unjust systems. One can't go too long without seeing *something* that calls for us to be Martha—*something* that calls for us to get to work.

That work might be advocating with our local or national government. It may be donating our time or resources to a worthy cause. It might be protesting behaviors or policies that are unfair. It may even be as simple as talking to our neighbors to find ways to come together and find common ground. There are lots of "Martha" things we can do and "Martha" things that we are *called* to do as followers of Christ.

But we're also called, as those same followers of Christ, to find time to be Mary. Sometimes the most important thing we can do is sit at the feet of Jesus to learn, to pray, to listen. This is what we do on a Sunday morning. We come here to hear the word of God for our lives. We worship and praise God. We share this wonderful meal together of the body and blood of Christ. We connect with our brothers and sisters and remind ourselves of our identity in Christ through our baptism. This is one of the places we are able to be "Mary."

But we cannot always be Mary: that would mean we'd spend all of our time in church or with other church people and we would miss our calling to go out into the world, to be the hands and feet of God for our neighbor. Likewise, we cannot always be Martha: we would never make it if we *only* spent our time hard at work. We need time to rest and be restored by Word and Sacrament and the community that bears them.

It is not a competition. It is not an either/or. It is a both/and. So, who are we in the story? Mary. Martha. Both. And.

Amen.