

Today we have one of the familiar stories in the New Testaments—Jesus with two sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus was invited into their home by Martha when He entered their village. Then Martha was busy with her many tasks, including those associated with offering hospitality to a guest. The other sister, Mary, however, only sat at Jesus' feet and listened to what He was saying.

This annoyed Martha, understandably, and she complained about her slacker-sister to Jesus. "Tell her then to help me," an exasperated Martha says to Jesus. Somewhat surprisingly, Jesus tells Martha, "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 from her" (Luke 10:41-42a). Here, Jesus reminded Martha that few things are needed—indeed only one, Jesus. Mary has chosen this one. This is the summary of the situation of Jesus, Mary, and Martha in the story.

Seriously, do we have any idea how much work it takes to put on a nice dinner for others? Honestly, I need to spend the whole morning for having the guests over lunch at home, or spend the entire afternoon for having the guests over dinner.

It concerns me that this text is often misunderstood in a way that leaves church ladies and their male counterparts, those whose gift is behind the scenes service and hospitality, feeling like dirt. As if the moral of the story is that serving is wrong, and sitting around at Jesus' feet while others are scurrying around doing the work, is the only proper way to show our devotion to God.

I cannot believe this was Jesus' intention in pointing out the contrast between sisters Martha and Mary that day. After all, Jesus Himself modeled servant leadership. He knelt at the feet of His disciples at the Last Supper to wash their feet. Throughout both old and new testaments, we are urged to practice hospitality, from the laws of Exodus and Leviticus to the book of Hebrews, where we're reminded that by showing hospitality to strangers, we may be entertaining angels unaware (Hebrews 13:2). Jesus further told us that any act of kindness and service for the least of these members of his family is an act of kindness toward Him (Matthew 25: 40). And it was only a few chapters ago in

Luke's gospel that Jesus called out Simon the Pharisee precisely for *not* being a gracious enough host (Luke 7:36-50).

So, I'm guessing we can eliminate "stay out of the kitchen" and "stop serving people" from the list of better interpretations of today's gospel text. Surely, this cannot be Jesus' main point. But if that's not it, what is it? It's a pretty succinct story. All we're really told is one sister is rushing around busily as a hostess and another sister sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to what He's saying. The rushing-around sister complains to Jesus that the sitting-down sister won't help. And Jesus says, it's the sitting-down sister that has "chosen the better part" (Luke 10:42).

It sounds like Jesus highlights the sitting down at His feet, in Mary's better choice. Let's reread Jesus' words. Jesus says in Luke 10:41-42, "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 from her." Worried and distracted by *many* things instead of being focused on *one* thing. This seems to me to be at the heart of what Jesus is trying to bring to Martha's attention, rather than serving vs. sitting.

Have you ever heard the expression, "wherever you go, there you are?" Sounds straightforward enough, right? Except: what if wherever I go, I'm anywhere *but* there? While we are here at online worship now, we're thinking about our workday tomorrow or dinner we need to prepare or something else. While having dinner with our family, we have our cellphone, checking our email, or Facebooking. Our body may be in one place, but our head can be in an entirely different place.

How often are we at the present moment wholeheartedly without any distraction? I've lost track of how many of you I've talked to recently about the category overload in your lives. So many things are causing us to be worried and distracted, aren't they? So many things that it can be hard to settle down and focus on the *one* thing that's really needed at any given moment.

And of course, in Mary and Martha's case, the one needful thing was the thing that Luke had been calling attention to throughout his gospel. The Messiah had come! Jesus was the Son of God, and He was right there in their midst!

Indeed, a big piece of what Jesus is trying to convey in the story of Jesus,

Mary, and Martha as He makes His way from town to town is simply *that*: "I am here! I am here!" I'm standing right in front of you. You who long for a closer walk with God. You who long for a sign that God is with you and for you. You who wish God would make Himself known to you in a real way. "I am here!" says Jesus. And so often, His contemporaries couldn't see it. Even His closest friends, folks like Martha, who adored Jesus and wanted Him to feel welcome in her home, couldn't always see it. Not completely.

Granted, I've always wished Jesus had prefaced His remarks in Luke 10 by saying, "Martha, you are an amazing cook. Thank you for welcoming me into your home, and working so hard to make me an incredible meal, and set a beautiful table." Though perhaps He did thank her, and she was simply too busy to notice. Either way, Jesus' words that are recorded for us seem at least to convey: Martha, I am *here*! Emmanuel, God with you. I am *here*. Please enjoy our time together. Please allow yourself to be where you are, even for just a moment. Be here with me.

*That's* the opportunity that Mary seized, that her sister did not. The opportunity to notice Jesus' presence. And that's where I am most convicted by the story of Jesus, Mary, and Martha today. Because while I don't think Jesus is saying service is wrong, and sitting still is inherently better, I do believe He's saying, "I am here!" and sometimes we are far too busy to see Him.

We are worried and distracted by many things, especially last year and somewhat this year also. So, I would like to ask us, "Where is Jesus at this moment where we are?" Is He sitting right in front of us, and we haven't even noticed? Is Jesus in the joyful exuberance of a young child, or at a moment of meaningful conversation with a friend? Was Jesus present in a moment of silence we didn't allow ourselves today, surrounded as we were by noise and chaos? Or, busy as we were with service—some of it truly good and worthwhile service—did we miss the face of Jesus in that person we were serving? Or in the face of a person that was serving us?

"You are worried and distracted by many things," Jesus says to all of us, modern-day Martha's. "There is need of only one thing." Choose the better part. Because no matter how many categories of life we may be trying to juggle on any given day, wherever we go, there we are. What if we tried to really *be there*? And even more importantly, what if we managed to remember Jesus is there too? The choice is ours. Amen.