

Being a Mary in a Martha World

In the name of him who, though we were evil and hostile to God, reconciled us by his death on the cross in order to present us to his Father holy, blameless, and without reproach, dear friends in Christ: For this morning's Gospel lesson we heard the very short account of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany. It's a popular story from the life of our Lord, one that's showcased in many sermons, devotions, and books on Christian discipleship. It's even the subject of skits for children, some of which I've seen performed by students at CLS. What amazes me, though, is that for as popular as it is, how often the people who use it for teaching purposes completely miss the point of the story.

What I mean is this: it's usually unpacked according to the following formula. Mary and Martha are both wonderful women who represent two different approaches to being good disciples of Jesus. Mary stands for those who are *students* of the Word, the hearers and learners, who sit at Jesus' feet and passively absorb his teaching. Martha, on the other hand, stands for those who are the *doers*; they are those who serve the Lord Jesus primarily by their *actions*. They get things done. And the thing to see is that both approaches are equally valid. Both are needed in the church. We have to have some Marys and we have to have some Marthas. The question is: which are you? Pick one or the other. Choose your path to discipleship, whichever suits you best. They're both just as good. Or in some versions they'll say that there needs to be some of Mary and some of Martha in all of us. The goal is to strike the right balance—but, of course, we might as well admit it, the Marthas get a lot more done than the Marys do. So if you're not sure, you really ought to lean more in the direction of *doing* rather than sitting there like a useless lump just *listening*.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard the story explained this way. I'll bet you have too. The trouble is *that it's just plain wrong*. It's the exact opposite of what Jesus means to impress upon us through this story. Listen, I'm going to make this as clear as I can: Jesus commends *Mary* for choosing the right part of what it means to be a disciple. He holds her up as the example to follow. He has *no* word of approval for Martha, none. She has chosen *incorrectly*. She doesn't understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

And boy does that offend us. We hear that and think, "What do you mean? Martha's the one working like crazy to show her love for Jesus. She's going all out. She's probably spent days cleaning house and doing up the room in which Jesus is to stay during his visit. She's tried to ensure that every detail is perfect, that every creature comfort has been provided for him. And now that he's here, she's executing an elaborate meal that she's planned to honor him and show him how much she cares. If nothing else, *her heart* is in the right place. Surely she deserves some credit for wanting to do the right thing. She wants nothing more than to serve her Lord."

It makes so much sense—and *yet it is so very wrong*. I dare say it's dead *wrong* because it's Satan's deadly deception. And the deception is this: that there is something you can do by your own power and your own initiative to serve the Lord or to please him. It can't be done. Why not? It's because we are by nature sinful and unclean, and therefore all the works that we do are steeped in sin—even the ones we count as good and honorable. *Especially* sinful are those we think of as good, in fact, because to these sinful acts we add the lie of their acceptability to the Lord. So, what we count as our good deeds – the ones we think the Lord ought to be happy with – are doubly damning to us. With our direct and obvious violations of

God's Law, at least, we know that we're sinning; but with our imagined good works we deceive ourselves into thinking that our hands are clean and our motives are pure. They're not.

We see this conundrum played out already in the fourth chapter of Genesis. Both Cain and Abel bring their sacrifices the Lord. The Lord rejects Cain's offering and accepts Abel's; but why? It's always assumed that there must have been something wrong with Cain's offering. That's true; but it's not what people think. It's usually assumed that Cain must have given to the Lord grudgingly or that he scrimped somehow and gave only his substandard leftovers to the Lord. But that's not what the text says. It says that he gave his first fruits. He gave his best. He gave to the Lord the fruit of his hard labor in the fields, the best he could offer. His problem was thinking that his best should please the Lord. Abel, on the other hand, knew that even his best work stank in the nostrils of God. He knew he was a sinner. But he had listened to the Lord who had said first that sinners deserve to die, and second that in his mercy the Lord would accept a substitute death – a lamb that could die in the place of the sinner so that the sinner, trusting God's promise, could stand before him forgiven and counted righteous.

Cain, you will recall, became angry that his best was rejected. It's the same anger and sense of injustice that we feel upon hearing that Martha's ostensibly well intended service is not what Jesus wants from his disciples. The very notion of it rubs us the wrong way. Why? It's because we live in a Martha world, one in which actions are believed to speak louder than words. And we want so much to believe that deep down inside there is some goodness in here – something we can offer to the Lord – be it our works, or our hearts, or our worship and praise, or our service, or our good intentions; *something*. But all of it, from the Lord's perspective, is a stinking pile of garbage.

But isn't it true that actions speak louder than words? In a way, yes – and Mary has chosen the better part. She's the one doing the right thing in the story. "What do you mean? She's not doing anything. She's just sitting there listening." Exactly. That's the right thing for a sinner to be doing when Jesus is talking. It shows trust in Christ and dependence upon his Word. It also shows an understanding of who is to be serving whom. Remember Jesus came not *to be served*, but *to serve* and to give his life a ransom for many. He is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world – the one Abel's lamb foreshadowed. It's *Christ's* actions that matter. They are the ones that please God because only his actions are without sin. He's the one who lived the perfect life and who offered to the Lord the perfect sacrifice of love – his own life on the cross – as the covering for the sins of the world. And sinners receive the blessings that flow from Jesus' life and sacrifice by listening to the Word of God that tells of his life and sacrifice. It's the story of the entire Scripture.

And so, like Mary, what we ought to be doing is listening to Jesus who speaks through the entire Scripture because that's how Jesus serves us today. By his Word and his Holy Spirit who always accompanies his Word, he condemns our sin and our futile attempts to serve him with our imagined good works. And by the same Word and Spirit he creates faith in our hearts that assures us that for *his* sake and on account of *his* work our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with God. More than that, listening to Christ's Word is how Christ is formed in us. It's how he becomes a part of us, changing us from the inside out, so that Christ in us can then do the works of love that God desires. By hearing and internalizing the Word of Jesus we become his hands, his feet, his lips – his active body doing his work in this world.

That's what happened to Mary. Remember that she was not always passive and inactive. It's Mary of Bethany who later anointed Jesus with costly perfume just a few days before his death. The disciples thought it a waste of the precious ointment – it was worth a

whole year's wages; but Jesus extolled Mary's lavish gift and devotion. He said that her act that would be remembered wherever and whenever the Gospel is proclaimed. So isn't that interesting? Two sisters who both want to serve Jesus. One's sacrifice is accepted, the other not. What's the difference? Martha acts *independently* of the Word of Jesus. She hasn't got time to listen to him; she's too busy trying to please him with her *work*. Mary, on the other hand, listens to Jesus first and then she acts. Her service is guided and motivated by his Word. It is, in fact, a Christ-like sacrifice that she makes. But the point is that you cannot be a doer of the Word if you are not first and foremost a hearer of the Word because it is precisely by the Word that Christ is formed in you.

Therefore what every one of us should want to be is a Mary in a Martha world; that is, in a world that naturally thinks like Martha does. And I need to stress this: like so many other things in the kingdom of God, the idea that Mary rather than Martha should be our example of discipleship is counterintuitive. That passively hearing the Word and letting it work on us from within before we do anything else seems like a waste of time. There're things to do, we think, we know what they are and we can handle them on our own. We need to get on them. No. That's Martha – the one who doesn't understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Being a disciple means listening to Jesus and allowing him to fill you with himself through his Word. That's what enables you to serve God and others in a God pleasing way.

So, how does this play out? Allow me to give you a few examples. I'll start with a couple of obvious ones. Over the years I've attended several churches on what were special days for the congregations in one way or another; you know, like an anniversary for the church or a beloved church worker. And usually when they have one of these special services there's a celebratory meal that's going to be served immediately afterward. Well, I don't need to tell you what happens. While the service is going on – that is, while Christ is speaking through his Word and serving his people – the serving committee is busy in the kitchen making final preparations. That is to say, they're doing the Martha thing, and they probably think they're right for doing it. After all, who's going to serve all those people if they don't? But ask yourself this: where would Jesus rather see them? And would it kill anyone if there were a half hour delay between the service and the start of the dinner? I doubt it. Along the same line (and I've said this before), I've found it's always easier to get volunteers for projects that need to be done around the church than it is to get the same people to attend a Bible study. They'd rather be doing than hearing; but again, what's the Mary of course action – the one Jesus says is the one thing necessary?

But let me shift gears here for a moment, because the examples of Mary and Martha demonstrate how we ought to approach our weekly worship. Traditionally, our Lutheran services follow the example of Mary. The congregation as a whole is relatively passive. You're here to hear the Word of God and receive the Sacraments – to let Christ minister to you through the action of the pastor. The idea is that then, having received the Word of Christ, you go out and live a life of service filled by Christ and empowered by his Word. But along comes what's called contemporary worship, which is borrowed from other theological points of view. Such services typically begin with the praise band up front leading the congregation through at least a half hour or more of praise songs designed to get people "in the mood" for worship. But pay close attention to what's being said in these songs. Who's driving the verbs? I'll tell you. They're usually all about the people singing rather than the Lord. They express the sentiments "Lord, I love you, I praise you, I worship you, I give my life to you", and so on. They're about what *I* am doing and feeling. In other words, they're Martha songs. People say to me, "You just don't like the style of music". I admit that's true in many cases; a lot of the songs are just bad musically. They sound like second and third rate pop songs from the 80s and 90s. But the real

problem I have with them is their bad theology. A good hymn is God's Word set to music. It tells of what Jesus has done – his work for our salvation – rather than our love and devotion for him. I don't need a song that says, "I give my life to Jesus." A Mary song tells how Jesus gave his life for me.

This is the kind of worship we need at the beginning of each week: the kind that's like the old service stations. I'll bet a lot of the younger folks don't know what that is; but if you go back a few decades, when you pulled into a gas station there were attendants there. They pumped the gas for you, checked your oil, the air pressure in your tires; they washed the windshield – all at no extra cost – and the gas was less than 25 cents a gallon. Those were the days. Now it's all self service. You pay a whole lot more for gas and you do all the work. And as a result, a lot less gets done. I mean, who among us checks the oil or the pressure in the tires as often as we should – especially if it's cold out or raining? We've gone from Mary to Martha at our gas stations, and our cars are suffering on account of it. And now people think we should go from Mary to Martha in our church services? The only thing that can happen is that our discipleship and faith in Christ will suffer. Let's not go there.

Let's be Marys in a world of Marthas. Let's begin our weeks and each day of those weeks thinking not, "I am going to go out and do my best to serve the Lord today!" But instead, by starting in God's Word, the one thing needful, and allowing it to reveal our sin and our need for a Savior as great as the one God has given us in Jesus his Son, let's let him serve us. Then, our sins forgiven and our hearts filled us with Christ, we'll be equipped to do God's holy will even as Christ did. May the Lord grant it to us. In Jesus name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!