

“*Sorry, Martha*”
Luke 10:25-28, 38-42
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Back when I was a rather mediocre undergraduate psychology major, there was one particular psychoanalytic device with which my counterparts and I were fascinated. It was called with the *Rohrshach* test.

You may not know it by that name, but I bet you might recognize it by its colloquial name:

the *inkblot test*.

Now, this particular technique was way beyond the pay grade of college level wannabes. And I was headed toward seminary anyway.

But that didn't stop me from fantasizing

over how cool it would be someday to sit across a table from a client, showing them a series of cards with variously shaped inkblots on them,

and asking them what they see in each inkblot.

The theory is that when you look at one of them, whether you see--say, a *butterfly*, or your mother-in-law, or perhaps a basketball player launching a jumpshot--

provides a window into how your mind works.

And given your responses to enough different inkblots, a trained analyst could begin to figure out what makes you tick, psychologically.

Now, it seems to me that this story of Mary and Martha, more than any other story in the New Testament, functions as a sort of *biblical* ink blot test.

Different people respond to it *very* differently. And what you see in it may provide an insight into what makes *you* tick, spiritually.

For example, many folks see (or hear) this account as a put-down of Martha and her responsible, reliable way of being.

And particularly if they happen to *share* those characteristics, they do not take kindly to this story.

“How would the work of the church get done,” they ask, “if not for people like them who step up and do their share

—or usually *more* than their share?”

(In the spirit of full disclosure, my own mother --very much a Martha type—went to her grave still *annoyed* with Jesus over this episode.

“Just like a man,” she would grumble. “It’s not *fair*.”

Nonetheless, others read or hear the same words and very much identify with Jesus’ instruction to stop and smell the roses.

Or in this case, his call to recognize that Mary’s capturing of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is the better deal.

And others yet, generalize the story more broadly, seeing it as a commentary on the *contemplative* life versus the *activist* life.

Is it better to devote oneself to doing what seems good and necessary,
or to go for a deeper understanding of what is good and true?

And here again, this story has often driven a wedge between *mystics* and *doers*,
each claiming to hold the keys to the kingdom.

Meanwhile, one thing can be said for sure:

In contrast to last week’s Good Samaritan passage (which may be the most beloved story in the New Testament),

this story of Mary and Martha is a leading candidate for being the most *controversial and resented*.

So, a question for you: could this be another of those biblical stories in which a lot more is going on than first meets the eye or ear?

Perhaps the place to begin, in unraveling this little episode, is to realize that it is joined at the hip with that Good Samaritan story that immediately precedes it.

For one thing, both stories—upon closer inspection—turn out to feature the breaking of those *boundaries*

that were so important to the established religion of ancient Israel.

In making such an unlikely figure as a *Samaritan* the hero of the first story, Jesus violates

the cherished vision of Israel as God’s *insiders*, separate from—and better than--those other peoples who lived around them.

And in the second story, Jesus is teaching a *woman, for God’s sake*—thereby ignoring the laws against doing such a thing.

But if that’s not bad enough, by cornering the lawyer into *admitting* the Samaritan is his neighbor,

and enticing Mary to sit with him and be taught,

Jesus has pulled these two *into his web* of boundary-breaking!

And then, the icing on the cake: By whispering to Martha that her bustling hospitality, so carefully prescribed by law and custom, is less important than this opportunity to draw near to God,

Jesus has just ripped up the playbook and thrown it away!

And then here is a clue from an even broader look at what's going on in Luke's story:

If you were here three weeks ago, you may recall that just a few verses earlier, Jesus has decided

to set his journey toward Jerusalem, and the cross that he knows awaits him there.

Thus, *everything* takes on a new focus and urgency.

So when he tells Martha that she is worried and distracted with many things

and that only one thing is necessary and that Mary has chosen the better part, perhaps it's not just a guy thing (Sorry, Mom.)

Could he be saying to her, in effect, "Martha, you have no way of knowing, but this is the last time you will see me.

The cooking, the place-setting can wait; seize this opportunity to draw nearer to the Son of God."

So it seems to me that there are *two ways in which we can ruin this story* that Luke has preserved so carefully.

The first is to *disparage* Martha. She is probably *right* that things would fall apart without her; and unless I miss my guess,

this is not the first time that she has been left to do it all on her own.

And God knows, we *need* the reliability and responsibility of the Marthas of the world.

But the second way to ruin this story is to *excuse* Martha too readily. In automatically springing into high gear, she misses the meaning of the moment,

and she compounds the problem by trying to co-opt Jesus to intervene on her behalf, rather than confront her sister herself.

(Could J have handled the situation more tactfully? Of course.

You will hear me say many times from this pulpit that Jesus is an equal-opportunity offender who must have flunked sensitivity training).

But you Martha-types, both female and male, please *hear* Jesus tenderly saying to you,

“Martha, Martha, you have so much on your mind, and you’re missing the thing that I most want for you ...”

and ask yourself if that sounds as if you are being put down,
or being *loved* into seeing more clearly.

Y’know, I had a friend in college who was a baseball player. He was fond of saying, in response to all manner of situations,

“Well, you win some, you lose some, and some days you just show up at the wrong ballpark.”

I think the worst you can say about Martha is that she simply found herself in the wrong ballpark that day.

Even though it was her home and her kitchen, it turns out that her hospitality is not what this visit was about.

Meanwhile, the relative merits of being a Mary-type or a Martha type extend beyond your personality or mine.

Presbyterian pastor Cynthia Jarvis devotes her commentary on this passage to the question of Mary and Martha *churches*.

Granted, she says, most churches need more Marthas in order to do what has to get done.

But having too few Marthas doesn’t mean that you *have enough Marys*, either!

And the result can be frantically focusing on *doing more*, to the extent that there is no real sitting at the feet of Jesus

and drawing deeper into the word of God.

“A church that has been led to be ‘worried and distracted with many things’ inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shallows of frantic potlucks, anxious stewardship campaigns, and events designed simply to perpetuate the institution.” (Jarvis, *Feasting* ...

Thankfully, that does not appear to be *this* church. But Mary and Martha provide a cautionary tale that no church can ignore.

So now that we have looked, on consecutive Sundays, into the Good Samaritan and Mary-Martha,

let’s look at what it might mean that Luke has placed these two stories right up against each other.

Most New Testament scholars perceive that Luke has done that

because both stories respond to Jesus' encounter with the lawyer at the beginning of today's reading.

You will recall that the question the lawyer asks is, "How can I have eternal life?"

And they agree that the answer is to love God with one's entire being, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Then each of the two stories, in succession, reflect on different aspects of that question

--the Good Samaritan story on what it means to love your neighbor as oneself, while the Mary/Martha story explores what it means to devote oneself wholly to God.

So in Luke's attempt to *tell and interpret* the story of Jesus, he has placed, side-by-side, Jesus' instruction to "go and do" with his instruction to "stop and contemplate" ...

So here we are, back at the inkblot test. When you look at these two stories, what do you see?

Both for yourself and your congregation, is it "go and do" or "stop and listen"?

Well, scholars of Luke's gospel generally agree that his overarching theme is 'to *hear* the word of God, and *do* it.'

Either story, apparently, is incomplete without the other, in Luke's assessment.

So perhaps the final word goes to the late, great Fred Craddock:

In his commentary on Luke's gospel, he notes how nice it would be if you and I could *ask Jesus*, "Which is it? 'Go and do,' or 'stop and listen?'"

Craddock says, "According to Luke, Jesus would probably say, '... yes.'

Please pray with me:

Lord Jesus, help each of us to see both with Mary's eyes and Martha's eyes—so that we might discern when to 'do', and when to listen and contemplate. Then may your will may be *seen* more deeply and *done* more gladly. Amen.