

One of the other pastors and I were talking the other day about how much we loathed group projects in school. We both felt like we ended up doing all the work yet we were still graded in part on other people's contributions or lack thereof. Even when I was teaching I rarely required group work for anything that received a grade, and when I did allow the students to work together, I would caution them to choose their partners wisely. And it doesn't happen just in school; I wait with bated breath to see if whatever a colleague said they would handle actually gets done. All this is to say that I identify with Martha's dilemma in today's gospel.

Like the Good Samaritan last week, this is another of Luke's stories that is so familiar the punch line no longer surprises us, not because it shouldn't surprise us, but because we've heard the story so many times. Jesus visits Martha's home, and while her sister Mary sits listening to Jesus teach, Martha becomes overwhelmed by the work of hospitality. Martha does what we often do: instead of going to the person who she's mad at—Mary—she goes to Jesus to try to get *him* to get Mary to help her. Her request seems reasonable, so we might expect Jesus to tell Mary to lend a hand. But of course we know that Jesus *commends* Mary's choice, instead of sending her back to work.

There are a few misconceptions it's easy to make here. First, this is not about Mary becoming the first ever female theologian. That Jesus sometimes seems surprisingly progressive to us says more about us and how misogynistic Christianity became over the course of its history and how hard it has been for us to break out of that mindset; it's not because Jesus was breaking the rules of first century Judaism. There was no law against women studying or even teaching scripture; so as much as we might want to see this story as Jesus liberating Mary from a lifetime of domestic service, there's nothing to say that she had done anything extraordinary by taking an afternoon off from the kitchen.

It's also wrong to assume that this one brief scene portrays a complete picture of who Mary and Martha really were. We talk sometimes about people being "Mary's" or "Martha's" as if there was only one dimension to their personalities. Yet in John's gospel, when we meet Mary and Martha at their brother Lazarus' tomb, we find that Martha has done her fair share of theological study, too. Martha is angry that Jesus didn't come in time to heal her brother, so Jesus assures her that he will rise again. Martha says, and I'm paraphrasing here, *Yeah, thanks,*

*I know all about the resurrection, but that doesn't do me any good now...* So Martha herself must have spent other occasions in religious study. It's just not what she's doing today.

It also misses the mark to say that Jesus distinguishes between being spiritual and being practical, judging the spiritual good and the practical bad. Hospitality is not only a gift, it's a necessity; we've all gotta eat. Martha gets weighed down by the responsibilities of hosting guests, yet that work was expected of her. We read in Genesis about Abraham running to the three travelers to invite them to rest and share a meal. They are divine visitors, bearing God's message that Abraham and Sarah will have a son. Now, we could point out that it's not Abraham himself but Sarah and his servant whom Abraham makes do all the work, but still, Martha has a perfect scriptural mandate for how someone is supposed to offer hospitality to the Lord. So Jesus doesn't tell her that what she has done is bad; he tells her she's been *distracted* by all that good work. Mary, who wasn't so distracted by *doing* for the Lord that she forgot to *be with* the Lord, did, this time, what was better.

So if Martha sometimes cooks dinner and sometimes learns about the resurrection, and Mary sometimes sits at Jesus' feet and, we can assume from Martha's request, at least sometimes does the housework, then we really have two examples of women who, like us, cycle through seasons of service and seasons of sabbath, times when we offer hospitality and times when we receive it. But we also have at least one example (Martha) of how easy it is to forget that all of us do both *and are called* to do both. If you hang around the church long enough, you're going to be asked to take your turn doing the kind of work Martha did here. But if you have Martha-ed to point where you're complaining to Jesus about those who are learning at his feet, it might mean it's time to reconnect with your inner-Mary. It's not that the practical work isn't important; it's not that it shouldn't be done; it's not that we shouldn't take our turn doing it. But when we let ourselves get so *distracted* by it, as Jesus says of Martha, we're missing why we're doing it all in the first place.

We're called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, since our neighbor is where we find the Lord, whose spirit lives in others as the spirit lives in us. When the ways we think we're serving God make us less loving to the *people* of God, we may be keeping very busy, we may even be keeping very busy doing good, productive, moral, impressive, constructive things, but we're not doing what we're fundamentally called to do. Love will always be the better part; may we choose love.