

Sermon for July 20, 2025 – 10 a.m. Service
Pastor Liz Kuglin-Alyea
Two Sisters

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I have a confession to make: I approach this seemingly straightforward text with both an attraction and an aversion. Let me explain.

It's so easy to identify with the situation in Martha's home. All of us have been in circumstances within our families, working environments, or volunteer groups where we're working away at the task at hand and someone else is not. We feel we're being taken advantage of. My bet is that this story triggers these memories in many of us. We can remember experiencing feelings of resentment, frustration - even anger - bubbling up to the surface and threatening to spill over. These feelings roil around in our hearts and minds, and sometimes our guts. They can spoil relationships, result in words spoken that can never be taken back, or which fester inside as bitterness. We can identify with Martha, with her dilemma, and that holds an attraction for us because, in a sense, Martha's story is also our story. We can empathize with her, working hard to offer hospitality to a guest in her home while her sister sits there and doesn't raise a finger to help.

Now for my aversion. Years ago, at worship in my home congregation, my pastor was preaching on this text. His sermon was on the differing types of discipleship characterized by Mary and Martha with Mary representing the better one. In the middle of his sermon, he leaned over the pulpit, pointed a finger directly at me, and proclaimed, "*And you, Liz, are a Martha.*" Gasp! I could have slunk under my chair and disappeared. I had just been labelled in an unkind, very public way and I have never forgotten the incident or the tone of his voice. It accused me and implied that Mary's contemplative life was the more perfect life, not mine.

Between attraction and aversion, this text is problematic. If we take these two women as archetypes, that is, as main models or basic examples for discipleship, the conclusion formed is that they represent two types of discipleship or two ways of following Jesus in the world: Martha is active; Mary is contemplative. The bigger issue is that these archetypes have been gendered so they are easily shrunk to Martha fussing and Mary sitting quietly, distinctions that are not applied to male

disciples. Both dichotomies derive, in many ways, from the story itself in which Martha shows Jesus hospitality while Mary sits at his feet. Yet these women are both doing good things. It's not that one is better than the other: it's all good things.

Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. She offers hospitality by receiving him and preparing a meal for him. Earlier in chapter 10, Jesus sends out his disciples two by two, instructing them, "*Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick and say to them, 'The Kingdom of God has come near to you.'*" (Luke 10: 8-9) Zacchaeus is another who also welcomes Jesus into his home. Hospitality is key in Luke's gospel so in this wider context, those moments of welcome and hospitality on the part of Martha are lifted up throughout the story. Welcoming is the act of a disciple in Luke's gospel. Martha is doing the right and good thing. Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet while listening to his words. Sitting at someone's feet in biblical times is a sign of deference to a teacher and indicates a teacher-disciple relationship. Also, in the context of the larger story in Luke's gospel, listening is an act of discipleship. Jesus says in Luke 8, "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*" (Luke 8: 9) Mary is doing the right and good thing.

Yet, all is not peaceful in the Kingdom of God that has come near in Martha's home. The upset is not with what either sister is doing but with the eruption of those frustrated feelings that overflow in Martha. She isn't receiving any help from her sister. That's so relatable. She's juggling a household, getting a meal together and serving the Lord. She turns to Jesus, asking why he doesn't seem to care or recognize her need for help. I wonder why Jesus just doesn't say, "*Martha, why don't you just talk directly to Mary?*" It's a perfect example of triangulation. Martha is putting Jesus in the uncomfortable position of choosing between two good things: either telling Mary to stop listening and lend a hand or rejecting Martha's entreaty. But Jesus doesn't enter into the triangulation. Rather he tells Martha that she is "*worried and distracted by many things.*" His words don't mean that Martha, working on those domestic tasks whatever they are, is wrong. He's drawing her attention to the reality that she's become focused and distracted on the perceived shortcomings of her sister and all the worry that brings with it.

I remember my grandmother in her later years being so excited that her adult nephews were coming to visit her. To celebrate, she decided to do something special to mark the occasion and what could be more special than to make muffins and serve them to her nephews, hot, right out of the oven. That's just farm

hospitality back home. But while she was baking, her nephews arrived. They visited with my parents and aunts and brothers and me. All the while grandma was working hard at getting those muffins baked. Finally, the nephews had to continue their way. They were in their car, ready to head down the farm lane, when grandma appeared carrying a platter stacked with muffins, hot from the oven. She

thrust the platter through the open car window, insisting they take some of her baking for the road. And then they drove off without ever having had the opportunity to visit with her. She was out in the kitchen, so focused and distracted by making muffins, that the pure joy of having that visit was lost. My grandma wasn't unlike Martha in that regard.

You see, Martha, in her worries and distractions, had lost sight of the pure joy of honouring her guest. Jesus is the guest who has brought the very presence of God and the Kingdom of God to her house! It's this misorientation, not her service or hospitality that leads to Jesus' gentle chiding. (As an aside, my other grandmother could say one's name in such a gentle, low voice that you knew at once that you'd better straighten up and listen!)

Jesus goes on to tell Martha that *"there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."* In the wider context of Luke's gospel, after the parable of the rich fool, we remember Jesus saying to his disciples, *"... do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you - you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."* (Luke 12: 22-31)

The provision and care given to us by God, in the larger scheme of this gospel, means that the anxieties we have around what we do are misplaced, especially in light of what God is doing for us. It's a liberating message. We are invited in this text to look at how the story is larger in context than a simple localization pitting the discipleship of Martha against Mary and of Mary against Martha. The story of these two sisters invites us to reflect on what is the better part that Jesus offers to

everyone, the better part that can't be taken away. Luke isn't attempting to prioritize one act of discipleship over another: disciples both serve and listen; disciples engage both in the contemplative and the active practices of faith. He is presenting the idea that we can do right and good things but still be distracted and worried and focused on the perceived shortcomings of those around us rather than on our own relationship with Jesus.

Luke's deeper concern is that our orientation be in the right place. And that orientation is toward God and God's extravagant provision for what is needed in our lives of faith. We find ourselves by times serving and providing for others and at times entering into deep reflection and prayer. It's not one or the other. Whatever that time is for us, we trust in God. Trust alleviates our worries and distractions. It calms our souls with the knowledge that God provides what we need and allows us to move forward in our lives of faith. Jesus is inviting us to get caught up in the joy of being in his presence so that all the worries and headaches and distractions fade and we simply be and live and do what we do "in Christ." There is nothing more important than to live in the "now" of one's relationship with God. David Lose, pastor, professor and author, puts it this way, "*Here, then, is a spirituality as easily practiced in the kitchen as in the study, at school or at play, while working the farm or looking for work. What matters is not so much what you are doing, but the attentiveness to God's presence and purpose in, with, under all our varied activities and responsibilities...Jesus wants to draw each and all of us into a relationship that lifts us beyond the everyday limitations of this life that we might glimpse, if only for a few moments at a time, the sacred in the mundane, the extraordinary in the ordinary, and the holiness with which each and every moment of this life is imbued.*"

Amen. Thanks be to God!