

Are You Like Mary or Martha?

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The Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning clearly address hospitality in the ancient Near East, although the two events that took place are roughly 2100 years apart. Hospitality customs were a vital part of the culture of the ancient world. The people followed these customs as formal, almost sacred, codes of conduct. They developed as a result of the environment in the Near East. Much of it is a desert and arid. It is a harsh place. For a traveler, access to water and food was, and still is, a matter of life and death. At the same time, it was important that people who lived in settled communities around the oasis and water wells or those who lived in tents following their grazing animals be protected. So, as a result, strict customs of conduct developed to govern encounters between travelers and people who lived in an area. People who were residents were obliged to provide for travelers who stopped by their homes or tents and “strangers” whether they were traveling or resident aliens (sojourners) were expected to treat their hosts with respect and gratitude.

So, in the story of Abraham in our Genesis reading, we see that when three strangers appear to him, he runs to greet them. He lavishly welcomes them by bowing to them. This may seem outlandish and extravagant to us but under the circumstances and according to custom, he was just doing what was expected in the culture of the day. His hospitality included offering them water to wash their dusty feet. This was an added indication to the strangers that Abraham accepted them and showed no hostility to them. After that, Abraham directed Sarah to prepare a sumptuous meal. He told her to use three seahs worth of flour to make cakes. The cakes were round unleavened cakes similar to our pancakes today. They were

heated on hot stones in a camp oven. Abraham was very humble by saying he would provide a morsel of bread but three seahs was a very large amount for three men. It was the equivalent of 21 quarts in today's measurement. In addition, he butchered a calf, which was a great sacrifice. Near Easterners rarely ate meat and selecting a calf, while tender, meant that the animal was being used well ahead of its maturity. The curds and milk only added to the luxury of the meal Abraham offered his guests. Notice, that Abraham didn't eat himself. He gave everything to his guests who sat in the shade under the oak tree and ate the food he offered.

The news was a luxury in the ancient Near East also. There was no cable news networks, blog, television, radio, or even newspapers. In return for their hospitality, travelers often gave their hosts the latest news that they knew from their travels. Now, Abraham recognized that one of these men was **"the Lord."** The Lord had appeared to Abraham previously, so Abraham seemed to recognize him. The other two men appeared to be angels (a fact borne out in the next chapter where they are named **"angels."**) But the words, **"the Lord"** when used in this context meant Jesus Himself. He appeared in human form but not as a human. Abraham was to receive powerful news from Jesus. He was going to be a father. What news! Indeed, this son would be the beginning of a lineage through which Jesus would be born in human form and be the Messiah, the Savior of his people and us.

Now, notice how important hospitality was in the ancient world. Hospitality is important in our world as well. Did you know that originally a hospital was actually a wayside inn in which weary travelers could find food and lodging and refreshment from their journey? They were called hospitals because their primary purpose was to provide hospitality. Do you remember the Gospel lesson last week? Where did the Samaritan take the man who was beaten and robbed in Jesus'

parable? To an inn. The whole business of treating wounds at inns arose out of necessity as guests came to a hospital bruised and scarred from their journeys whether by robbers or the elements.

The Gospel reading connects to the concern for hospitality in the Old Testament story of Abraham and three visitors. This time Jesus comes to the house of Mary and Martha (and Lazarus although he is not mentioned in this story). Jesus had no home of His own during His ministry. He relied on hospitality (the code of conduct of the Near East) and He told His disciples to do the same if you remember the Gospel from two weeks ago. Notice, that it is Martha who invites Jesus into her home. Jesus had been a guest of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus before. Their home was in Bethany only about ten miles from Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. We don't know why these three had no mother or father. Perhaps, they had died leaving them orphans. Since Jesus is making His way to Jerusalem, He is in the company of disciples. Two weeks ago that number was 72 not counting the original 12. The number of people in Jesus' entourage may have been quite large. Martha was probably happy to see Jesus but probably stunned at the task of providing for His entourage which she was bound to do by the code of hospitality. So assume 72, plus 12, plus Jesus, plus some others from Bethany who may have "dropped by." Martha, who appears to be the oldest of the three had her work cut out for her. Martha also seems to be the doer.

Martha had compassion for her guests. She was taking action, a doer, just as we learned we should do in the story last week about the Good Samaritan. Compassion without action is meaningless. How can you show love to your neighbor if you don't act? So, Martha got busy and started preparing a meal for Jesus and those who were with Him. Mary, on the other hand, sat at Jesus' feet like a disciple. That act in and of itself was highly irregular. Women in Jesus' time were not educated and

Mary was assuming the role of a student at the feet of Jesus. Highly irregular.

Now, Jesus was a guest and according to the rules of hospitality in the Near East, He would have been telling the news. Jesus was not a “Tucker Carlson” or a “David Muir.” Jesus told about spiritual things. He taught about spiritual things and we have to imagine that He was doing that with Mary at His feet and the others around Him listening to Him. Martha was working feverishly in the kitchen preparing a meal for all of them.

Have you ever taken a Myers-Briggs test? It’s an instrument used to get a handle on identifying personality traits. Among other things, it tells us that some of us are extroverted. We draw our strength from outside of ourselves. And some of us are introverted. We draw our strength from within. Here’s a little test: When there’s a crisis, do you pick up the phone and call your friends and family or do you go off somewhere to be by yourself? When things go awry, an extrovert tends to get into high gear; an introvert tends to hunker down.

Not only that but some of us are predominantly thinking types, systematic and analytical, while some of us are predominantly feeling types, empathetic and emotional. And some of us prefer to get things resolved and brought to a close, while some of us prefer to keep things open-ended, fluid, and subject to change. If I were to compare Martha and Mary to some others in Jesus’ orbit, I would say Peter was like Martha and John was more like Mary. Peter was a get-in-your-face type of guy. John was more reflective and quieter. I think you can see who the extrovert and the introvert were in this story.

Martha in her exasperation with the job she faces goes to Jesus and tattles on Mary. Here she is doing all the work, which she knows needs to be done. Mary is sitting and listening to the Word of God. ***“Jesus, do something about this, Martha says.”*** Do you see what Martha is really saying here? She is saying

don't you care about me? I would like to be sitting with her too but who is going to prepare the meal? Have some mercy on me, Jesus. Tell my sister to help me.

Her heart's desire was to be like Mary, to be where Mary was – sitting at the feet of Jesus – but her sense of duty, her sense of what others expected and others would think made her stay in the kitchen. I get a picture of her constantly popping in and out of the kitchen trying to hear what Jesus was saying and all the time her frustration levels just grew and grew until finally, she let it all out.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me!” How could she ask such a question of Jesus? But then I thought about how often I actually ask that question of Jesus when my frustration level gets high. Sometimes I even find myself saying it aloud; *“Lord, don't you care...”* Did you notice that Martha made a telling statement – ***“...my sister has left me with all the work to do.”*** If you read that phrase, it seems that there must have been some point at which Mary abandoned the kitchen, abandoned Martha, abandoned the preparation, and went and sat down at the feet of Christ. There must have been some point in time when Mary decided that being at the feet of Christ was more important than food for over a hundred people. Mary made a conscious decision that at this, God-given, moment being at the feet of Christ and listening to Him was more important than anything else. And her sister Martha resented her decision. Martha resented the fact that Mary had left the preparations and gone and sat down at the feet of Christ. Martha now demands that Jesus tell Mary how wrong she is and she wants Jesus to commend Martha for her hard work.

Now let me ask you a personal question; *“Are you a Mary or a Martha?”* The truth is that there are some of you here who are definitely “Martha's.” You are doers, and there is nothing wrong with being a doer, except when it keeps you from the

feet of Jesus Christ AND when it leads you to criticize a brother or sister in Christ. Some of you have what might be called the “Martha syndrome.” You want everyone to know how much work you have been doing while others sit and listen to teaching/preaching or go to Bible studies and attend potlucks but don’t bring a dish to pass.

That reminds me of a story. Three women were killed in an accident on their way to a women’s Christian conference. They all arrived at the Pearly Gates and stood together before St. Peter. St. Peter asked the first woman, “*Were you a Christian on earth?*” And she said, “*Oh, yes, I was a Roman Catholic – here are my rosary beads.*” St. Peter looked at her beads, saw how worn they were, and said, “*Oh, my. Welcome to God’s heavenly kingdom.*” Then he turned to the second woman and asked, “*Were you a Christian on earth?*” And she said, “*Oh, yes, I was a Southern Baptist – here’s my Bible.*” St. Peter looked at her Bible, he saw how worn it was, and said, “*Oh, my. Welcome to God’s heavenly kingdom.*” Then he turned to the third woman and asked, “*Were you a Christian on earth?*” And she said, “*Oh, yes, I was a Lutheran – see, here’s my casserole dish!*”

Often times our frustration grows until we feel like Martha. We get into the “Martha syndrome” whether we are women or men in the church. And some of us love the “Martha syndrome.” It’s apparent. Some of us won’t let anyone else help us in our tasks and then we complain, maybe not aloud, but we do complain in your spirit saying “*Lord, don’t you care that... I am left to do it all?*” And, sometimes we may even go as far as Martha did and tell Jesus to “have them help me.” Our frustration, like Martha’s, becomes a distraction and then overflows into anger and bitterness. We feel that if we have to work everyone should work as hard as we do. Have you ever found yourself in that situation? Have you ever felt yourself asking God to get those other people to do something? Have

you ever confronted God to let them see what you are going through or what you have gone through?

Martha had the gift of hospitality but she wanted Mary to exercise it as well. She didn't want Mary to enjoy the teaching if she had to work in the kitchen. But I want to ask a simple question of you today, did you read or hear in this story that Jesus asked Martha to prepare a meal? Martha had placed such expectations on herself that she became fixated on the task and lost sight of the love she should have been showing all along for the Good News of Jesus. Worse, it led her to sin against her neighbor and become even further isolated from the message of Jesus.

The meals you share with those who are in need, or sick, or in grief; the visits you make to the homebound and elderly; the extra effort you put into welcoming visitors and helping them become part of our family of faith here at Our Savior's Way is all pleasing to God. And they are all important to the mission of Christ's kingdom on earth. Hospitality is a precious commodity. It's the staple of Christian discipleship. But your attention to the Word, read, spoken, and studied, is the most important thing.

It can become so easy for us to get wrapped up in all the things we need to do and the things that need to be accomplished that we lose sight of the most important thing, what Jesus calls the thing that is necessary, and ***"the good portion."*** That ***"good portion"*** is a steady diet of the Word from Jesus.

In love, Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. She served Him from her kitchen. By contrast, Mary sat at His feet and held on to His every word. Her love for Jesus was no less or greater than Martha's.

The point is that we need to see the highest priority in our lives and choose it, as Mary did: to learn of Jesus so that we can become like Him. It's a love and devotion to Him that makes everything else of secondary importance. This means that we

seek the riches of wisdom and understanding that are in Him. If we don't do this, how can we follow Him, how can we be His disciples? A disciple learns of the Master.

This is not an excuse to be lazy, and not take responsibility for anything. That is another trap entirely. As our lesson taught last week, we are to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only! (James 1:22) But what we do has to be led by the Spirit, whose voice we learn to hear, by choosing the good part. There is no blessing in running our own lives based on our frail human understanding of what is important. Mary understood that she needed to learn more from her Master. She needed to hear the Good News that He brought to her. She needed to seek the things that have eternal value. It's when we do that that we can be a blessing to others because then, all of our works are Spirit-driven. Love causes us to listen, learn, and keep the commandment to love God. Hearing causes us to keep the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And this is where I'd like to close the sermon today, to recognize that while Mary and Martha were as different as night and day, Jesus made a place for each of them in His heart. I like to think that, as different as we are, God makes a special place for each of us in His kingdom. He calls us to hear His Word and then He calls us to share the Good News of His love with others in our own words and in our actions based on the gifts and talents God has given to each of us.

May you find your Mary and Martha in the days ahead and place the love of God and His Word in your actions toward your neighbor in love to His glory. Amen.