Martha and Mary

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This is the [link to the Zoom recording](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/fS8Q69qg8t-5pS7DA4UtNYP0IfrpsJIEsU8d5ouYuWn0y-2zS470J2egAbGSQVz4.vXM6O2mV3UIz9FZU?startTime=1657461700000) of Kate’s sermon.

Texts:   
 Luke 10:38-42  
 Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

**38** As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. **39** She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. **40** But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

**41** “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, **42** but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Oh, Martha, Martha. In hindsight, listening to this passage Jesus’ final conclusion seems rather obvious — that “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” Obvious to everyone except Martha, perhaps.

While we don’t know a whole lot about Martha, references to Martha are found in both Luke and John. We know that she is the sister of Mary and Lazarus, and that she lived in Bethany, which is now in the West Bank in Palestine. The book of Mark suggests that she is the daughter of Simon the Leper. Further, since Martha appears to play the role of host when guests come to her house, she is likely to be the oldest of the siblings, and may, in fact, be an owner of the house, having inherited it from her father. This would mean that the very important role of offering hospitality and caring for guests would fall more upon Martha (both as homeowner and a woman) than upon her siblings.

We know that Martha, Mary and Lazarus were some of Jesus’ closest friends. John 11:5 says that “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” And that Mary’s brother was the Lazarus that Jesus brought back to life, as told in John 11. So, there seems to have been a longstanding and close relationship between Jesus and Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

Knowing about the friendship that existed between Jesus and this family helps us understand why Martha felt free to complain about Mary to Jesus in the Luke passage that was read this morning. ***“***But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’*”* We also have better insight into why Jesus felt free to gently correct his good friend:“‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed — or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’”

Interestingly, this is not the only biblical account of Jesus enjoying the hospitality of these sisters and their brother. In John 12:1-8, we learn that Jesus’ anointing occurred at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, which in the book of Mark is identified as the house of Simon the leper, who would have been their father. John tells us that Mary was the woman who poured the costly perfumed oil on Jesus’s feet (to the objection of Judas, who saw this as a waste of money), anointing Jesus — honoring and consecrating him, six days before Passover and shortly before his death.

John 12:2 tells us what Martha and Lazarus were doing just before Mary anointed Jesus:“There they gave a dinner for Jesus. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him.”

So we now have two accounts where Jesus is invited to the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. In both accounts Martha was in charge of the kitchen and hospitality. In both accounts her sister Mary was with Jesus in the living room, as was Lazarus.

Here I will make a confession — I am a person of Martha-like qualities. I am quite sure that, if I inserted myself in either one of these stories using the Ignatian prayer practice, I would show up as Martha, banging pots and pans in the kitchen. (Who do you think you would show up as?)

I feel a sense of relief when reading this second account of Martha and Mary, where the dinner goes more smoothly and Martha isn’t upset and isn’t corrected, however gently. By reading this, with my Martha-like tendencies, I understand that it’s just as ok to be Martha as it is to be Mary. And we haven’t even talked about Lazarus and what he is doing while these dinners are being prepared and served. At the same time, the contrast between the accounts of both dinners invites us to explore what it means to be Martha and maybe even what it means to be Mary. And we can leave Lazarus for another day.

Since I have such strong resonance with Martha’s approach to life (I also focus on the work to be done), I think I can provide some insight into Martha’s mind from my own personal perspective. When I imagine myself in Martha’s kitchen in the first story, I feel a sense of anxiousness — there are lots of guests, including their beloved friend Jesus. Perhaps Martha was taken by surprise by the visit and wasn’t prepared to play host at that moment. Perhaps she didn’t have the right ingredients on hand to offer an exquisite meal, worthy of the family’s reputation as host and of the guests awaiting the meal. Perhaps she didn’t feel she had time to prepare the food before the guests started getting hungry. Perhaps she was irritated by having to carry the burden of being the host all by herself. We do know that she was irritated: “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

And again, we also know of Jesus’ gentle response, and invitation to lay these burdens down: “You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed — or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

I’ve spoken before to many of you about the deepening commitment to inward journey that has taken root within me over the past few years. This commitment is manifest in my membership in the inward journey mission group, in my ongoing meditation practice, in my study of shamanism and other inward-looking spiritual practices. Through this journey I have learned the discipline of sitting still with my emotions and thoughts (especially when they are uncomfortable) and, instead of reacting to them, listening to them to hear the stories that they have to tell. I have found that, through this discipline, I am better able to act authentically, from my best intentions, rather than reactively, to quiet the fears that are clamoring to be heard.

Returning to the first story of Martha and Mary, and putting myself in that kitchen, the hidden truths that my bustling about the kitchen and feeling irritated at people in the other room would have been masking, are fears that I was not good enough, that I would fail in my responsibilities as host, that people would see my inadequacy. I would disappoint myself and others. And almost always at the core of this kind of exploration I find the fear that I would not be loved. In the kitchen, upon reaching that desperate, depth of despair, I would then rise up in anger — this isn’t fair. They aren’t being fair. And no one but I can see how unfair it all is. It isn’t my fault, it is someone else’s. And, given the cultural expectations of the time, the first person that comes to mind is Mary. I am going to fail because Mary isn’t helping.

As I have deepened my inward journey practices, I have found that I am only able to hear these whispered, fearful, despairing and demanding voices inside of me and welcome them into conversation when I become still. And it’s only as I pay attention to my hidden doubts and fears that I am able to embrace these shadow aspects of myself and invite healing and integration, leading to a more spacious interior self that is ready and willing to offer service in love rather than out of fear. In this way, I am bringing my whole self into my choices, which are grounded in intention rather than reaction.

I think that this is why *call* is so central to our way of thinking at Eighth Day. If we respond to call, we labor in love and are less likely to let fear get in the way. If we respond out of duty, we have less resilience.

Here I will quote a couple of sentences from the call of the Inward Journey Mission group, which is to

broadly extend the invitation to deeper participation in spiritual and communal life through intentional inward journey practices that enliven our awareness of God’s presence in the world and in our lives. … By encouraging these practices, we seek to make larger the inner space that nourishes us on our journey home to God and a life with purpose, hope and belonging.”

I believe that this is exactly the invitation that Jesus was extending to Martha when he said to her, “You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed — or indeed only one.” Jesus was inviting Martha to let go of her distractions with the kitchen, inner anxiousness and sense of inadequacy — throw them off, leave them behind — to create space for authentic relationship with Christ in that moment. In other words, get out of the kitchen and join us in the living room.

Gordon Cosby wrote about the importance of this inner work in his essay “Remember the Deeps”:

We pay a high price for consciousness, but the price is even higher for unconsciousness. There is a surface level of reality, and a deeper level, the level of perfect peace, wonder and surprise. The surface swirls with events, circumstances, problems, worries. Its tasks seem impossible and overwhelming. In the deeps, something else is taking place. In the deeps, there is no confusion, no complexity. There is only the present moment. By planting the stakes of our lives down into those deeps, we can begin to experience a restful detachment from the swirling events on the surface.

Trish Stefanik’s contribution to Inward/Outward this week says the same thing, in a different way. Beginning with a reflection on the story of the Good Samaritan, she talks about a children’s book called *The Three Questions* based on a short story by Leo Tolstoy. Trish writes that both the book and the short story respond to questions also being asked in the Good Samaritan story about how to be a rightly good person — where, with whom, and how. In all the stories in the children’s book, Trish tells us, there is unexpected grace and restoration and the “right” answer comes as one is present, attentive, and lovingly responsive to the person and situation at hand, moment to moment.

This is what Jesus’ loving invitation to Martha was in this morning’s story about dinner — to leave behind the noise of superficial reality, complete with clanging pans in the kitchen and guests and sit in the living room, to enjoin a deeper relationship based on what’s going on right now. To do this, Martha needed to let go of the reproaches of her own mind and the anxiety in her own heart, to release herself into the restful detachment of the deeps, where intimate relationship with God and others is possible. Gordon says, “In the deeps, the resurrection body is forming. There is only the present moment and the one thing we are, in this moment, to see and revel in and do.”

So, this is the interior work that Martha is called to do. I suspect that, over time, Martha has earned her place in community by playing the role of host, to the extent that she has forgotten that she is not “the host.” She is Martha. Jesus is asking her to stop doing (stop being the host) so that she can just be. So that she can just be Martha, who is loved just as she is, with or without a meal ready to be served.

This is what I believe is what we can learn of Martha in this story. But I don’t think that this is the whole story either. What about Mary? In both stories where Jesus was hosted in Martha’s house, Mary (likely the younger sister) has been in the living room while Martha was in the kitchen. Would Mary’s route to the deeps, where she would live in response to the present moment, invite her into sometimes engaging in kitchen work? Perhaps, but I will leave that to someone else to expand on. And perhaps this provides food for thought for all of us — whether we are more like Martha or Mary or even Lazarus. What do we need to stop doing so we can just be present, in this moment? But this isn’t the whole story either. Let’s go just a little deeper.

Ecclesiastes 3:1: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.

In *The Promise of Paradox,* Parker Palmer writes that the spiritual journey sharpens and magnifies our sense of contradiction. The wholeness of the Spirit contrasts dramatically with the brokenness of our persons and our world. The truth of the Spirit only highlights the untruths we are living. Indeed, the ultimate contradiction is the apparent oppositions between God’s light and our own shadowed lives. Parker Palmer suggests that the way through is to transform the superficial appearance of contradiction into the embrace of paradox — where seeming opposites blend to form one whole truth.

Adding this idea to the exploration, I find myself turning from a comparison of two women — Martha and Mary — with opposite approaches to life, to two opposite aspects of myself, where my inner Martha is thriving and always ready to make an appearance and my inner Mary is shy and retiring. In reading both of the accounts where Jesus had dinner at Martha, Mary and Lazarus’s house, we see that the Martha response has just as much validity as the Mary response — depending on the situation at hand, and whether that response was an offering of love or reaction to some unmet, interior longing or fear.

I can share with you that my own inward journey work has led to a surprising change for me. I’ve decided to lay down my long-time Martha-like career of working in finance and operations to work in the area of leadership coaching, which is much more Mary-like.

In 1515, Teresa of Avila wrote:

Living a spiritual life means we are able to live our life in total polarity. This means we are at ease in the in between spaces:

– between tradition and progressive viewpoints   
– between rational and emotional responses   
– between taking action and just being there   
– between solitude and leisure   
– between fasting and feast   
– between discipline and wildness.

If we are not growing in our spiritual life then we get stuck on one end of the spectrum or other and we can end up bland, lukewarm, mediocre and isolated. The only way to live a spiritual life is to be able to touch both sides at the same time. Knowing that it is in the interplay between living the spectrum (of these opposite polar forces) that we deepen our spirituality and become more aware of who we are, whom we choose to be and in challenging times how we show up.

My friends, like many of you, I have a sense that we are possibly entering into even more challenging times that most of us have experienced, up until now. To be prepared, we must ground ourselves in “the deeps” that Gordon spoke of, committed to the interplay of living the spectrum of paradox, where seeming opposites reveal themselves to form two sides of one truth. We must live beneath the distractions of everyday life to establish that deep connection with the Divine that resides within, and thus prepare ourselves to engage in confronting, creating and otherwise standing in our truth and forming relationship rooted in love, not fear, for all to see and experience. We must learn to be both Martha and Mary, expressing both of these aspects of loving relationship at the right time, as an attentive, and lovingly responsive to the person and situation at hand, moment to moment.

May these words that I have spoken today serve as a blessing and benefit for all who hear them.