

On their way from Jericho to Jerusalem, a crowd of disciples with Jesus stops at Martha's home. In the passage immediately before this, Jesus has just told the familiar, but often underestimated, parable of the Good Samaritan that we heard last week. And to appreciate what Jesus means by "the better part," we have to hear the two stories, not as separate events, but as two moments in one larger teaching.

In the first story, Jesus presented an astonishing character who was the model of neighborly hospitality: A Samaritan trader whom many of Jesus' listeners would have despised as the stereotype of shady dealing, unreceptive people. But against all expectations Jesus told a tale about a man who, with his heart moved, set aside his own plans to care for a wounded man at great expense to himself. In the same story, Jesus told of two devout holy men that behaved in inhospitable ways toward the same wounded man.

In today's story, Jesus stops in on a family that he loves dearly and whose house he packs with people. Yet when Martha asks for help, Jesus appears to chastise her for making hospitality such a priority. Jesus then seems to commend Mary for putting her religious sensibilities before the work of serving others. But Martha is tending to strangers and Mary is ignoring her social obligations, in some ways, like the priest and the Levite did in the first story.

The apparent contradiction can be disconcerting. Until we remember one thing—the context of the conversation last week. Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to a scriptural scholar who had challenged Jesus into a contest of knowledge and interpretation. Jesus rose to the challenge by responding to a question with two more questions, which the Torah expert answered correctly. He quoted part of the Shema, the essential Jewish prayer that summarizes the teachings: love God with all of your being, and love your neighbor.

Christians refer to the scholar's answer as the Great Commandment. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gave this answer to the scholar, but Luke puts it in the mouth of the scholar to set up *both* the parable of the Good Samaritan and the counterpart story of Martha and Mary. Luke intentionally uses the literary device of telling stories in tandem, and Luke's Jesus often matches one story about a man with another about a woman.

Luke presents the two stories as parts of one whole because the one Great Commandment has two parts: first, love God with all of your being and, second, love your neighbor. Last week, the Torah scholar skipped right over the first part to ask about the second, wondering in essence: "Specifically, who do I

have to love?” Jesus did not answer *that* question precisely, but gave the scholar a scenario in which he encountered the humanity of a person he had previously only seen as a stereotype. Without saying the words, Jesus showed the scholar that to fulfill the Great Commandment, he needed to see God’s activity, not in the wounded man, but in the Samaritan—a human being whom the scholar despised. Last week’s lesson emphasized the second part of the Great Commandment by showing God’s loving Spirit working through unlikely people.

This week, Jesus emphasizes the *first* half of the Great Commandment about loving God with all your being.

We heard that Martha was worried and distracted, but that doesn’t quite carry the turbulence of Martha’s turmoil. She is a dear friend to Jesus and so she is probably well aware of what awaits him in Jerusalem. Already concerned, Martha must now cope with overwhelming expectations as she tries to host Jesus and his entourage. In the midst of a crisis, Martha is desperately trying to serve. We do her a disservice if we simply criticize her without fully appreciating that her anxiety borders on full-blown panic. And her sister is not helping.

We do a disservice to both Martha and Mary if we reduce their story to a set of stereotypes: one woman who is vocal and active, and another who is quiet and contemplative. For centuries, we have given Martha a condescending pat on the head and Mary a congratulatory pillar. Or we have praised Martha’s practical, competent maturity while dismissing Mary’s quiet receptivity as an insult to women’s power.

But Jesus never intended to divide these two women nor did he place one of his dear friends above the other. Instead, Jesus sees both of them and speaks to Martha’s *anxiety* in her efforts to serve, not her activity. Our reading of his answer to Martha is not quite as compelling as the Greek that says something more like: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and *turbid*<sup>1</sup> about many, yet one is needed.” Without saying that Martha is wrong or irrational or somehow less than Mary, Jesus simply points out that Mary has chosen the good part, which he will not stop Mary from doing.

Last week’s story can be reduced to a morality tale about being kind to strangers. But no human can pour out relentless time and energy for each and every person they encounter. Only God can do that for every person, but God works most often through the small acts of kindness that any person can offer another. Jesus told a story to a Judean scholar about a Samaritan so that he might perturb his audience out of the certainty and safety of their stereotypical thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Confused, muddy, unclear, opaque

This week's story can be reduced to a story about women, and it is true that many of us still see women as unlikely disciples and have not yet learned to see God's loving Spirit working through our sisters. But the deeper teaching is for *all people* about genuine discipleship and ministry that puts God at the center.

Jesus came to his friends, Martha and Mary, to socialize and offer a little enlightenment about being in right relationship to God and each other. But as Martha hosts Jesus and the disciples, her focus appears to be not on Christ, but on her sister, Mary.

Luke's Jesus is clear that a disciple is someone who both *hears* the word of God and *does* the word of God. One who lives in the presence of God and who then serves God's creation. The Great Commandment is one command with a dual focus: love God with all your being *and* love your neighbor.

"Martha," Jesus says, "Martha, you are anxious and unclear about many, yet one is needed." Jesus is not chastising Martha, but addressing the cause of her distress. She is preoccupied with what her sister is or isn't doing. She may also be a little unhinged by the social pressure of her culture that judged a woman's honor and reputation by her ability to manage a household. Most of the people hearing this pair of Luke's Gospel stories would have readily accepted Martha's concerns as normal. They would also have accepted the reason that two men of God, the priest and the Levite, walked by a wounded man.

What would have been difficult for them was, first, a Samaritan as an example of mercy. But just as confounding is Jesus' interactions with Martha, who seems to be acting much like the Samaritan, and Mary, who seems to be preferring devotional contemplation over her duties as a host. The crowd would have seen Martha as behaving correctly and Mary as behaving inappropriately.

But Jesus invites his listeners to reconsider their assumptions. Rather than either praising contemplation over action or vice versa, Jesus puts his audience off-balance—into a state of unknowing, if you will—so that they can be opened to a new perspective that embraces both. Without loving *God* as our first priority, loving our neighbor can be exhausting.

And so, in Luke's conjoined stories, Jesus shows us how to live the one command with a dual focus. To follow Christ is to live in the presence of God and to serve. To follow Christ is to listen to the Word of God so that God is at the center of the compassion with which we act on behalf of others and all creation.

So what of Mary? What *is* the good part that she has chosen? Jesuit professor Fr. John Donahue makes this observation: "Perhaps," he writes, "one of the reasons that generations of Christians have found the Parable of the Good Samaritan so consoling to narrate, and so impossible to imitate, is that they are

too busy being Samaritans to listen to the Word with silent attentiveness. Nor do they experience that freedom possessed by the outsider who has so little to lose that only eternal life can be found.<sup>2</sup>”

Freedom. To be freed for the in-breaking of heaven is the good part. With these two stories, Jesus demonstrates that the way to that freedom begins with loving God with all of our being. With the solidarity of *that* relationship, God can help us to find healthier ways to tend to our relationships with others. God’s grace frees us to act by freeing us from attachments to the outcomes and from the encumbrance of stereotypical thinking.

We choose the good part by beginning and ending each day in prayer, and by coming together at God’s table. When we gather in the presence of the Risen Christ in the bread and wine, and in the hearing of the word, God reminds us that we give mercy, forgiveness and compassion because *God* gives these to us. We serve because God first serves us. We love because God first loves us.

Choose the good part. God will never take it from you.

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<sup>2</sup> Donahue, John R., S.J. *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.