

As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

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Last September, the New Yorker ran an article about personality tests that opened with this: "There are two kinds of people in the world: people who think there are two kinds of people in the world and people who don't."

The author was being a little cheeky, but there's some truth to it.

Luke's story about Martha and Mary presents a snapshot of two sisters interacting with Jesus. People who think there are two kinds of people in the world often understand Mary and Martha to be opposites of each other or in competition with each other. From that frame of mind, Martha most often represents an active lifestyle and Mary, a contemplative lifestyle, as though these were two utterly different ways of being.

Others see Mary as one who trusts God for her salvation and Martha as an example of those who try to earn it through their behavior. Theologians like to argue about the merits of justification by faith over justification by works. And then there is a misguided minority who see Martha, over-concerned with procedure, as a representative of Judaism, while Mary is described as the more gracious and attentive representative of Christianity.

All these treat Martha rather unsympathetically. That seems odd for Jesus – out of character. In John's Gospel, Jesus loves Martha and Mary, and it's Martha who rushes to meet Jesus when their brother Lazarus dies, while Mary sits at home.

If we choose to see them as Jesus surely does, we notice more than two types of people; two *categories*. Something exhilarating emerges when we open our minds to Martha and Mary as two different, but complex and nuanced women. If we allow these women to be more than one-note polar opposites, we discover their differences beginning to harmonize and complement each other.

The great Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, thought Martha was the more spiritually mature of the sisters because she could be about her business while still paying attention to Jesus. Let me tell you a story about a great Zen master that illustrates what Eckhart detected in Martha.

Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn taught a fairly established version of mindfulness meditation called “vipassana.” A typical vipassana practitioner concentrates on moving into each moment just as it is while paying close attention. Seung Sahn often told his students, “When eating, just eat. When walking, just walk.” This trains the student to be as fully present as they can in whatever activity they are doing at the moment.

One day, a student found the Master reading the newspaper while eating his breakfast. “Great Master,” the student blurted, “you have always told us, ‘when eating, just eat,’ and yet here you are, eating and reading the newspaper!”

Without a pause, the Master gently responded, “When eating and reading the newspaper, just eat and read the newspaper.”

Meister Eckhart proposed that Martha could just serve and listen when she was serving and listening. Mary sat in stillness and silence, without asking a single question.

Even so, in revitalizing Martha’s character, we have to be careful not to fall into the same old trap of lifting one woman at the expense of the other. One is engaged in table service and the other in absorbing the Word. Our Eucharist engages both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Table because both have their place in our relationship with the Holy One.

Resolution comes in what Jesus points out at the end of this reading: “...there is need of one thing: for Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away.” Despite the unfortunate translation of the Greek as “better,” the story of Mary and Martha is not about who *is* better, who *acts* better or who *understands* better.

A more accurate translation renders the Greek word as “good.” And the good portion offered to all followers of Jesus is to believe that we can become who God already sees us to be. The invitation is not for Mary to become Martha or for Martha to become Mary. The spiritual path laid before them is the same path we are on: to learn to intermingle each other’s strengths for the benefit of us all.

The “good portion” is the connection to God, to the ground and energy of effective action. The “good portion” is, put simply, love. Jesus leaves any reconciliation that the sisters might need up to them. Just so, we are also left to realize that God is the energy that sustains our personal being and at the same time the lure, the draw, to act cooperatively with God’s on-going creative activity.

Whatever that attraction is for you: loving service to another, the creation or appreciation of beauty, the pursuit of truth, working toward merciful justice, living generously and gratefully – whatever it is for you – it will become whole, it will become holy, as we wake up to the revelation that all this exists and is suffused with Divine life and love.

Episcopalian poet, Mary Oliver, wrote about the enduring love she shared with her best friend and soulmate, photographer Molly Malone Cook. Mary always referred to Molly as simply “M” in her writing. In reflecting on the gift of their differences, Mary wrote:

“M. and I have plagued each other with our differences for more than forty years. But it is also a tonic...and, of course, all of it, the differences and the maverick uprisings, are part of the richness of life. If you are too much like myself, what shall I learn of you, or you of me? I bring home sassafras leaves and M. looks and admires. She tells me how it feels to float in the air above the town and the harbor, and my world is sweetened by her description of those blue miles. The touch of our separate excitements is another of the gifts of our life together.”

A brilliant definition of the “good portion,” isn’t it! One love touching, flowing and dancing as two; the beautiful convergence and meshing of separate excitements. We don’t have to insist that anyone be more like us. We can learn to watch, instead, for ways to support each other as the child of God that we each are, and to harmonize as the community of God’s children that we are created to be.

Whatever our personality type or individual characteristics, we can all choose to accept the good portion that God has freely offered. And *that* will not be taken away from us.

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