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Mary & Martha
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Oh yes! The Bible has stories of sibling rivalries!

If you think this is a good one, don't forget Jacob and Esau, or Cain and Abel, or Joseph and his 11 siblings!

I don't think it's an accident that Lazarus isn't quoted in this pericope – smart brother knows not to get between and interfere with his sisters!

Mary vs. Martha!

Well, before we spread the divide too wide, Professor Jennifer Wyant at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta assures us that “the two women embody different aspects of Christian discipleship in Luke’s Gospel, and both are lifted up as positive characters. They are both doing good things. There is no villain in this story.”¹

“Martha is described as welcoming Jesus into her home. She is showing him hospitality by receiving and preparing a meal for him. Earlier in Luke 10, Jesus tells his disciples that those who welcome them will be blessed and that the Kingdom of God has come near to them (verse 9)...Welcoming is the act of a true disciple in Luke. Martha is doing the right thing.”

And, “Mary, is described as sitting at Jesus’ feet while listening to his words...In the New Testament and in its wider culture, sitting at someone’s feet is a sign of deference to a teacher and indicates a teacher/disciple relationship.”

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-3/commentary-on-luke-1038-42-6>

So really, when it comes down to it, we have two sisters, Mary and Martha, who are both disciples who show honor and reverence to their Lord – one by acts of service, one by acts of contemplation

There is no villain here!

So, why does Jesus say that Mary has chosen better?

Professor Wyant's interpretation of this text is that what Jesus is pointing out is not that Martha's actions of hospitality aren't worthy behaviors of a disciple, but that Martha has become distracted by the "wrong" things: "[Martha] became focused on the fact that her sister wasn't helping. Like the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son...Martha is focused on the actions of others and their perceived shortcomings, as opposed to focusing on her own relationship with Jesus. It is this misorientation," Professor Wyant concludes, "not her service or her hospitality, that leads to Jesus' gentle rebuke."

It's not that Mary's form of discipleship is better than Martha's, or vice versa

But, when we are critical of others, either for their actions or inactions, rather than focusing on ourselves, we worry about the wrong things

It's like when Marthas think Marys should be Marthas, and Marys think Marthas should be Marys

You get me?

I experienced this tension in seminary, but kind of flipped from today's pericope

In seminary, I felt like I was getting the messaging that to be a "real" Christian, I was supposed to be a Martha

I was supposed to be someone who was out on the street or the other places where direct service, direct acts of hospitality, were to be offered in Chrst's name

And, I'll tell you, when I realized I was a bit more of a Mary: it was when Michael Brown was killed by police in St. Louis in 2014, there were big protests in Oakland and Berkeley where I was studying

I decided to attend one of the protests one night, wearing my collar and feeling called to show up

The protest moved from downtown Berkeley, down University Avenue towards the highway where the plan was to walk onto the highway and block traffic

I wasn't the only seminarian or clergy there – lots of my classmates had come along and we recognized people from the other seminaries and local churches too

As a community, we marched down University Avenue – the main drag from the Cal campus to the bay – and I felt connected, empowered, and convicted in the power of the chants we repeated

The community marched all the way to the highway where those ahead of me climbed over the cement barrier and onto the 8-lanes of highway that run north-south on the east side of the San Francisco Bay

I walked all the way to the cement wall, and I didn't cross over onto the highway

I just didn't feel...called, comfortable, sure of myself enough to cross over

I wasn't alone, there were a few of us who gathered on this side of the wall

Just on the other side of the cement wall, on the edge of the first lane of traffic, was a seminarian from one of the other seminaries encouraging people to cross the barrier and join them on the highway

I stood there, contemplating, and the seminarian yelled “come on! you’re either with us or against us!”

I stood paralyzed for a moment – I didn’t feel called to climb over the cement wall, was I against them?

As I stood there, I offered my hand to those climbing over the wall - in both directions, on and off the highway – and, as I stood there, I found myself praying for those on the highway: for their safety, for the power of their message, and I prayed for myself and for the inadequacy I felt for not having the courage to climb over the wall

It took me some years to get over the guilt I felt that night for not being a Martha – for not being a Christian who based their discipleship in action

And, it took me some years to realize that I am a Mary – I find liberation and wholeness in contemplation, worship, prayer, learning, and then preaching, teaching, sharing

One is not better over the other – Marys and Marthas are equally important and equally vibrant responses to God’s call to discipleship – and I stand more firmly in my identity than I did back then

And, to be honest, me and that seminarian on the highway yelling that we were either with them or against them, we both have fallen into the Martha trap of this pericope where we become overly concerned with the actions and choices of others and allow ourselves to judge the Marys or judge the Marthas rather than focusing on our own spiritualities

To this day, I notice in myself and others that we are, as Jesus says to Martha, “worried and distracted by many things”

Sometimes it's Marthas distracted by Marys or vice versa, and sometimes it's just Marthas and Marys distracted by the things of life!

When I first read this pericope this week, I wondered: What are we overly-distracted by and how does it interfere with tending to our spirituality/discipleship/relationship with God?

If you're a Martha, what's preventing you from offering hospitality and serving others?

If you're a Mary, what's preventing you from finding time for prayer and study?

I know one of the big answers for me – it's this (iPad) and my phone and social media

My dad, who was one of the early sales people for computers when they stopped being the size of classrooms and were first put on peoples' desks, will often say: "I never thought I'd walk around with a computer in my pocket"

This "computer" is social media, it's work even when I'm not physically at work, it's connection to family and friends, it's streaming and entertainment, it's photos and videos that capture moments that matter

Like Mary and Martha, this "computer" is not intrinsically bad and yet it can embody so many of the things that prevent me from the aspects of my Mary discipleship that fill my cup, renew my soul, and bring me peace and a sense of wholeness

What about you?

What are the things that you overly-obsess about or get distracted by that get in your way of tending to your Martha or Mary spirituality? that get in the

way of your relationship with Jesus? that inhibit your peace, and deplete you of wholeness?

Jesus is not judging what kind of spirituality you feel called to – Mary, Martha, or even Marytha – he simply cares that you're able to tend to that spirituality and to your wholeness and your peace

What permission do you need to let go and release yourself of those things that get in your way?

Maybe you can hear from Jesus today precisely that invitation – live into your Martha, your Mary, your Marytha

Jesus said: “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.”

Jesus, thank you for placing calls on each of our hearts that give life to our faith, as Marthas and Marys. We pray now, give us the strength to name the distractions that get in the way of our relationship with you, and in naming these distractions disarm them, so that we might give our time and energy to the things that draw us ever nearer to your love. Amen.