

Martha: Distracted by her Many Tasks

Sermon for July 18, 2004

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they 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 Jesus' 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 Jesus 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."

Martha, Martha, Martha!

What were you thinking?

This week a lot of people have been asking that question.

As you know most church's follow a three year cycle of lessons that are to be read on Sunday mornings.

So, even though the North American media has spent the week focusing on the trials and tribulations of Martha Stewart, the fact that our gospel lesson is about the distractions of another Martha is purely coincidental.

Or is it.

For years now both of these Martha's have haunted me.

Domesticity is not exactly my strong point.

And should you visit the parsonage, it will be abundantly clear to you that the domestic diva, Martha Stewart has failed to make me over into a Martha devotee.

My domestic skills are mediocre at best.

I would much rather be found down in my office studying than up in the kitchen cooking.

And it is in amongst all those books that you will have to search if you want to understand Martha of Bethany.

Because despite the fact that Martha has been confined by the church to the realm of domesticity, you will not be able to find Martha of Bethany in the kitchen.

But like so many others, my search for Martha began in the kitchen.

You see, over the years, Martha of Bethany has distracted me.

Several years ago when I was involved in the operation of a retreat center, I was working in the kitchen with two friends of mine.

Together we had finished hosting dinner for about fifty people.

We had worked hard all day, preparing for the arrival of our guests and together we had prepared a magnificent meal.

We had welcomed and served our guests, who after enjoying their fill had moved on to hear a guest speaker lecture.

My two friends and I were busy cleaning up the kitchen and preparing desert that would be served after the program was over.

As we were working I longed to go up and listen to the speaker, but there was too much work to be done.

As we worked away, a woman came into the kitchen and chastised us.

She urged us to leave the kitchen and come up and participate in the program.

She warned us not to be such, "Marthas".

My friends and I understood this woman's warning for the chastisement that it was and,
You could have cut the tension in that kitchen with a knife.

After all, if it wasn't for our work the guest speaker would never have come and there
wouldn't have been any program.

None of us were at all happy to be labelled "Marthas".

This story is only one of several I could tell about the various times I have been accused of
being a, "Martha".

Over the years I have come to hate this label.

All too often this label has been used to minimize someone's ministry or to suggest that they
are neglecting their ministry.

I came to believe all of the negative things that the church and our culture have taught about
the woman know as Martha of Bethany.

I never wanted to be labelled a, "Martha".

Not me, no I love learning too much to stay in the kitchen. I would much rather be found at
the feet of the teacher than be caught fussing about in the kitchen.

Call me Mary, but please don't call me Martha!

I have always been drawn to Martha's sister Mary.

Mary knew where she belonged.

I have envied Mary, her place at Jesus' feet.

I grew to womanhood in the 70's, when the women's liberation movement was calling women
out of their traditional roles and I wanted to be like Mary and stay out of the kitchen.

I don't want to be distracted by Martha's chores.

In seminary, I took while taking a course on feminist theology, I was asked to select a woman
from the New Testament to write about.

So, I selected Mary of Bethany.

I chose Mary because I saw her as an example of a woman who had made the best choice.

I saw Mary as a role model for women who needed to get out of the kitchen and learn.

So I began reading everything I could get my hands on about Mary of Bethany.

And in the process I learned a great deal about her sister Martha.

The more that I read, the more I realized that my assumptions about these sisters from
Bethany did not quite jive with the actual Gospel accounts.

My assumptions were based largely on what the church has taught for centuries about these
women.

When I think of Martha, a picture from a children's Bible comes to mind.

In it, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him, while in the background Martha is
leaning against the kitchen door with an evil, distrustful look on her face.

There are no hymns about Martha that I can remember.

She has been made the patron saint of housewives and cooks.

Today, in England there is a group that is opposed to the emancipation of women and the
ordination of women that is called the Martha Movement.

The image of Martha has been firmly tied to the kitchen.

And yet over the centuries Martha's work in the kitchen has been chastised by theologians.

Martin Luther himself said, "Martha, your work must be punished and counted as naught."ⁱ

John Calvin accused Martha of carrying "her activity beyond proper bounds," because
according to Calvin, "Christ would have chosen to be entertained in a frugal manner."ⁱⁱ

The more the theologians chastised Martha's work the more it seemed that the church
chastised women whose work kept them busy and distracted in the kitchen.

As I read the traditional interpretations of our Gospel lesson I became more and more convinced that Mary was a better role-model for the modern woman than Martha.

After all Mary chose to stay out of the kitchen and sat at the teacher's feet and Jesus praised her for her choice.

But then I re-read the story and I realized that nowhere in this Gospel or in any other part of the Bible does it say that Martha was busy in the kitchen.

The Gospel writer didn't put Martha in the kitchen, but our culture has. What the Gospel actually says is that:

Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to Jesus 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'".

What were the "many things" that distracted Martha?

I had always been taught that Martha was too busy preparing a meal for Jesus and his followers.

But, could there be more distracting Martha than kitchen duty?

We know that Martha was a special friend of Jesus whom he loved dearly. Martha, her sister and her brother Lazarus are the only people in all of Scripture specifically named as those whom Jesus loved.

We also know that Martha was one of the wealthy women who helped to support Jesus and his followers.

We know that against the conventions of the day Martha, a woman was able to welcome Jesus, a rabbi and his followers into her home.

Surely a wealthy woman in Martha's position would have had servants to prepare the meals and serve her guests.

What was distracting Martha from enjoying her guests?

What was so important that it would distract her from her beloved friend and teacher, Jesus?

I do not believe that we can get an accurate picture of the role of Martha in the Life of Jesus from this one story.

In order to broaden our picture of Martha we have to turn to the Gospel of John.

In St. John's account of the raising of Martha's brother Lazarus we find an encounter between Martha and Jesus that has all too often been over-looked.

When Lazarus fell ill, a message was sent to Jesus asking him to come and heal his friend, but Jesus continued his work and Lazarus died. St. John writes:

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this?"

She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately,

"The Teacher is here and is calling for you." (John 11:20-28)

Jesus told Martha, a woman, that he is "the resurrection and the life".

Jesus entrusted Martha with this news.

Martha responded, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Martha knew precisely who Jesus is. Martha's statement of faith is similar to the Apostle Peter's statement of faith.

Simon Peter also declared to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

In Matthew's Gospel, Peter's statement of faith comes after Jesus has miraculously feed the five-thousand. Peter confessed after Jesus had performed a miracle.

But Martha's confession of faith comes before Jesus miraculously raised Lazarus from the dead.

We know that Peter went on to deny Jesus, not once but three times. There is no record of Martha having denied Jesus.

Martha may very well have been one of the "many women...looking on from a distance" while Jesus was crucified.

Martha may have been with the "other women" who went to the tomb and finding it empty brought back the "idle tale" to the apostles.

Peter's role in the early church is well known. Little is known of Martha's role in the early church.

Martha had a very special relationship with Jesus.

She was a disciple of Jesus, whom he loved.

Martha followed Jesus and articulated her faith in a way that paralleled Peter's confession.

She was a witness to Jesus' raising of the dead; she may have been present at the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Why then do we not herald Martha as an Apostle?

Surely Martha stands along-side Peter in her own right.

Well today's church may not herald Martha as an Apostle, but there is plenty of historical evidence to indicate that the early church did.

Let's look at our Gospel lesson again. "Martha was distracted by many things," some translations read: "Martha was distracted by too much serving."

The actual word that has been translated as serving, is the Greek word *diaconia*.

It is the same greek word that we get our word deacon from.

In the first century the word *diaconia* was used to describe leadership in church.ⁱⁱⁱ

Could it be, that Martha a follower of Jesus, was distracted by matters pertaining to Jesus' ministry?

We may never know.

But it seems to me that we have had one image of Martha for far too long.

The traditional image of Martha is incomplete.

Martha was a strong, active and out-spoken woman whom Jesus loved. Martha was an Apostle of Christ!

These days when people point an accusing finger at me and call me a "Martha", I take great delight in telling them about Martha.

I enjoy the surprised looks as I explain that Martha is a role model for all women and men who serve the church.

I try not to be too arrogant as I destroy the myth of the non-existent kitchen into which Martha has all too long been relegated.

I shall always wonder about the untold story of Martha and I will continue to try to imagine what the church, which I know Martha must have founded in Bethany, might have been like.

The author of the Gospel of Luke does not tell us what happened after Jesus chastised Martha, but based upon what we have learned about the relationship between Jesus and Martha, I like to imagine that Jesus took Martha's hand and told her to sit down.

I imagine that Jesus tried to ease Martha's concerns about his ministry.

Perhaps Jesus soothed Martha's anger at her sister Mary's apparent inactivity.

Perhaps Jesus explained that on this day they were all together and that they should rejoice in each other's company.

Jesus knew that he must go on to Jerusalem.

Jesus knew what lay ahead. Jesus knew that there was much to be done. But just for a moment they were all together.

Jesus had much to teach his disciples.

I am sure that all of us can identify with the disciple who was worried and distracted by many things.

We have jobs, families, friends and commitments that all clamour for our attention.

Some of us are worried and distracted by our own ministries.

Some of us are so busy that we resent those who like Mary have set aside their duties so that they might listen more closely to God's Word.

Martha's dilemma is our dilemma.

Christ is here, in this place among us and there is need of only one thing. We too must put aside our worries and our distractions and take the time to rejoice in Christ's presence.

To sit at the teacher's feet.

Christ knows what lies ahead for each of us.

Christ knows that there is much to be done.

But Christ calls us to slow down, to take the time to rejoice in Christ's presence.

Be still and listen, but above all rejoice, for God is here among us.

This is the Good News! Amen.

ⁱ As quoted in: The Women Around Jesus by Elisabeth Moltman-Wendel. (New York: Crossroad, 1993) page 17.

ⁱⁱ As quoted in : "Meister Eckhart and a Millennium with Mary and Martha" by Blake R. Heffner, in Lutheran Quarterly, Vol.5,Sum.1991.

ⁱⁱⁱ The word *diakonen* had already become a technical term for ecclesial leadership. In this text *diakonein* or *diakonia* does not refer to domestic service but to the eucharistic table service and the proclamation of the Word in the house churches of the first and second centuries. For a detailed exploration of the Greek word *diakonein* see: Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. But She Said, Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) pages 57-76.