



Jesus, Mary & Martha by Harold Copping

There's a quote sometimes attributed to Oswald Chambers which goes, "Quick, don't just *do* something, **sit there!**" That's what the Gospel Passage for today says to me. The Account of Mary and Martha as presented at the end of Luke Chapter 10 is unique. It occurs nowhere else in the Bible. Luke, among the four Gospels is the only one to present this episode which happened in the house where Lazarus lived, with his sisters Mary and Martha in Bethany, a small town about two miles from Jerusalem on the Eastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

I believe that part of the reason Luke insisted on including the story about the sisters Mary and Martha, was because of Luke's understanding of the importance that women are to play in the story of salvation. And this is true from the very beginning of Luke's Gospel. The witness of Simeon in the temple where Jesus is presented as an infant in Luke Chapter 2 – Simeon's proclamation which has become our beautiful *Nunc Dimittis* used in our Morning and Evening Prayer – Simeon's proclamation about the Christ child is coupled to the prophecy of a woman, Anna. (See Lk.2:36-38) Luke also brings out the women that Jesus utilized to teach through His parables. There is the woman who finds the lost coin in the parable of Luke 15, exemplifying the joy which is to be experienced whenever a single lost soul is returned to the fold. (See Lk.15:8-10) There is the persistent widow of the parable in Luke 18, which Christ uses as a model for stable and regular prayer. (See Lk.18:2-8) And of course, it is a woman who, in Luke Chapter 7 gives our Lord the welcome He **should** have received when he sat down to eat with the Pharisee Simon, the woman who, at that table bathes the feet of the Christ with her tears, and dries them with her hair.¹ (See Lk.7:36-39) Women are major protagonists in the Gospel of Luke.

The story of Mary and Martha that we heard this morning from Luke Chapter 10 may address Jesus' view concerning the work that women need to achieve in the building of the Kingdom right alongside men. In the polite, traditional Jewish society of the day, women typically prepared food and served guests. But in this instance, Jesus insists Mary remain there with him; He demands that Mary not go to the kitchen at that point, but that she remain with him and occupy the place of the Disciple, with all of the rights and responsibilities attributed thereto. Everywhere in Luke you see women together with men following the Lord during the various phases of His ministry. And very tellingly, in the second volume of Dr. Luke's work, the *Book of Acts*, these women continue to work side-by-side with the men after the Lord's Ascension. It is women and men in partnership together who launch the post-resurrection Christian Church.²

But beyond Luke's respect for the Christian woman, there is layer-upon-layer of meaning in this short passage about Mary and Martha. Jamieson's *Commentary on the Bible* notes how Jesus doesn't really turn either the contemplative Mary or the proactive Martha away from what each is doing, since both the contemplative and the active roles are necessary and indeed perfectly complementary in discipleship. And Jamieson goes on to observe, perhaps a little tongue in cheek, how "a church full of Marys would be just as great an evil as a church full of Marthas"³

And note how Martha does not actually call Mary away to help her in the kitchen – not directly. No, she asks Jesus to send Mary into the kitchen to help her. Why? Why doesn't Martha simply speak directly to her sister and require her to lend a hand with the potato salad and the fried chicken? What's the reason for asking Jesus to intercede for her? Could something else be going on here?

¹ David Di Silva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Intervarsity, 2004), p. 332.

² Di Silva, p. 332.

³ Robert Jamieson, *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Zondervan, 1961), p. 1005, L. Col., btm.

One of my Italian friends once explained to me that whenever an Italian mother complains that her son is a “picky eater,” what she’s really saying is, “Not only is my son a really picky eater, but he eats the food I prepare for him, so I must be a really good cook!” In a similar manner, we can observe the meaning beneath the words in this passage from Luke. “Lord,” Martha is saying, “Please send Mary to help me in the kitchen. Because, Lord, can’t you see all the food I’ve been preparing here? Can’t you see, Lord, all the frenetic work and toil I’m doin’ rattlin all these pots and pans? Why, I must love you **a lot** Lord, and all this hustle and bustle is proof of just how much I love you. But Mary, well she’s just sitting there doin’ nothin’.”



Jesus in Mary and Martha's House
by Johannes Vermeer

But Jesus, who sees into the hearts of us all, just smiles knowingly and says, “No, my dear Martha, Mary is most certainly not doing nothing. She is, in fact, listening to me. She is communing with her Lord, and I tell you that there is not a single more important activity in all the universe that she could be doing at this moment. So, no Martha, this part will not be taken from her. So don’t just do something, Martha, but instead just sit there!”

I sometimes wonder if we are not a world full of Marthas. Have we forgotten to keep the main thing the main thing? Are we so caught up in the clickety-clack of our lives, or do we even get so obsessively engrossed in our determination to accomplish great things for the Kingdom, that we actually forget to take time during the day to simply sit at the feet of the Lord, and bask in His love? Or worse, do we ever throw ourselves into the works of ministry with the hidden intent of proving to ourselves or others that “I must really love the Lord because look how hard I’m working for Him!”? Because I can assure you, that is most certainly **not** what being a faithful witness to the grace of Christ is all about.

Of all the epistles, the *Letter to the Colossians* from which we heard today probably speaks most powerfully to this absolute centrality of Christ in all things. Paul tells us that, “All things have been created through [Christ] and for [Christ]. [Christ] himself is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (see Col.116b-17). For Paul, Christ is the agency and the purpose for all creation. He is the very glue that holds the universe together. So, Mary’s determination to simply remain at her Savior’s side is second to no other objective on earth. To sit at The Lord’s feet is the one thing that truly matters in this world.

The thoughts of the great Bible scholar David DeSilva concerning the Gospel passage from today express so very eloquently the challenges for the Christian in our out-of-control world. I will close with them this morning.

“The story of Mary and Martha speaks in a timely way to an increasingly frenetic and frantic society. Jesus points Martha – and all of us who are so very much like Martha – to the core necessity of life. If we possess this one thing, it gives life to all that we do; if we lack it, we cannot compensate for that lack no matter how much we do. The one needful thing is to sit at Jesus’ feet, spend time in his presence undistracted and listen for **His** word. This is a hard lesson for many people, myself included, to accept. It is a hard lesson to learn in an active society where doing and visibly achieving are emphasized so strongly. But if anything must suffer this day, Luke says that it cannot be our spending time with God. We have books to read, committee meetings to attend, and leaves to rake. But first and above all, we have to sit at Jesus’ feet, wait on the Lord, and seek the face of God.”⁴

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit Amen.

jwb+ 04/21/2016

⁴ DeSilva, p. 347.