

Title: The Tale of Two Sisters

Subtitle: Choosing the Best over the Good

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/qNiphSOyrAA>

In the opening lines of Charles Dicken’s classic book, “A Tale of Two Cities,” we are presented with a contrast between the best of times and the worst of times. In today’s Gospel, we also have a classic contrast in what I would call “A Tale of Two Sisters.” Both sisters love the Lord and are followers of Jesus, yet they give us two diverging possibilities for discipleship. The story begins when *“a woman named Martha welcomed Jesus into her home.”*¹ As the story unfolds, we learn that Martha has a sister named Mary, *“who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.”*² Both of these sisters wanted to provide an intimate place where Jesus would be loved, honored, and served and where he could find a place of refuge and rest. But with all of their best intentions, all is not grace and glory.

Martha, as we learn, *“was distracted by her many tasks.”*³ Offering hospitality takes a lot of work. It happens to be one of the favorite things that Ellen and I love to do. This coming week we have the rare treat of having Ellen’s mom, who is 92 years old, come and visit. And on top of that, we will also have our middle son, Luke, his wife, and two children join us simultaneously. Our home will be busting at the seams with activity. Ensuring everything is in place for such a momentous visit takes a lot of work. And much like Martha, in our Gospel today, Ellen and I have the constant temptation to overdo it. We can’t seem to help from wanting everything to be too perfect.

¹ Luke 10:38

² Luke 10:39

³ Luke 10:40

Therefore, like Martha, our attempts to show love can drive us to a place where our nerves are worn thin. This predicament reminds me of Eugene Peterson’s translation of Matthew 11:28-30, which reads,

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me, and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me, and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Mary discovered these unforced ‘rhythms of grace as she “...sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.”⁴

This past week I read excerpts from James E. Miller’s book, ‘*The Art of Listening in a Healing Way.*’ He writes that listening is one of the most caring and affirming gifts you can offer another. He also notes that listening “...creates an open space in which the other person is free to express whatever matters most.” This principle has been something that rings true in my soul and has opened many doors into people’s hearts. In my spiritual journey as a pastor and friend to others, I have had many people open their hearts to what is going on in their lives. Just this past week, the person who cuts my hair expressed deep pain as her spouse recently had been diagnosed with bladder cancer. I share this as an illustration that being a good listener can put you in the front seat of many authentic, raw, and heartfelt issues.

In our Gospel today, Mary displays this gift of holy listening as she sits at the Lord’s feet. The original word used in Greek to describe this event implies that she not only sat at his feet but sat as near to him as she could reasonably get.⁵

In the Book of Acts, when things like money are placed at the Apostle’s feet, it implies that such gifts were entirely placed at their disposal. When Mary placed herself at the Lord’s feet, she put her whole self at our Lord’s disposal.

⁴ Luke 10:39

⁵ Strong’s Concordance #3869 parakathizo (par-ak-ath-id'-zo) literally, “to place near”

But living a life of ‘holy listening’ is not so easy. Martha, with the best of intentions, “...*was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.*”⁶ It appears that she had unrealistic expectations for herself and her sister, which, by the way, was a setup for anger and frustration. And she complained, “*Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.*”⁷

Stephen Convey comments on some of these unreal expectations in his book ‘*First Things First*’ when he says, “*People expect us to be busy. It’s become a status symbol in our society – if we’re busy, we’re important; if we’re not busy, we’re embarrassed to admit it. Busyness is where we get our security (because it is where most of us find our identity.) Therefore, it’s validating, popular, and pleasing. Unfortunately, it’s also a good excuse for not dealing with the things that should take priority in our lives.*”

Leadership development groups have also recognized this truth. In the publication “Pathways to Leadership, Richard Fell writes:

*“Time for reflection is one of the most valuable tools for leadership development. When a leader steps back from the day-to-day demands and gets perspective on long-term goals, its effects are felt throughout the whole organization. Yet, in the prevailing culture of “busyness,” time out and time for personal development are often the first things people feel they must forego. And thereby losing an opportunity to gain skills and insight needed to develop reports with the big picture in mind, thus ensuring most of the organizational ‘monkeys’ stay on the leader’s back.”*⁸

Such insights help to reinforce “the better part” that Jesus commends Mary for choosing. By sitting at Jesus’ feet, we are given an opportunity to sharpen our discernment skills and find wholeness and a faith perspective for the things that cause us to be worried and upset. There is an old saying, “The harder we work, the more worked-up we can become.” And getting ‘worked up’ lends itself to a judgmental spirit, which became evident

⁶ Luke 10:40a

⁷ Luke 10:40b

⁸ Some portions of the quote were paraphrased

when she asked, ***“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to serve by myself?”***

And how he answered her is instructive. He knew that she was trying to do a good thing. So, his dealings with her are very tender. When he addresses her, he says, “Martha, Martha.” In Semitic language, the doubling of a person’s name indicates intensity and magnification of feeling. An example of this occurs when Jesus approaches the Holy City for the last time and laments: ***“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ...how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”***⁹

Similarly, Jesus longed to bring Martha under his wings as he spoke tenderly to her. But, you see, Martha’s problem was not what she was doing because what she was doing was a good thing. But how she was doing it. In a book entitled “The Practice of the Presence of God,” Brother Lawrence illustrates how a person can do dishes while practicing God’s presence. So you can practice God’s presence while you are very busy, and your service can overflow with joy if you put first things first. By first allowing ourselves the freedom to place our love for God first and foremost.

Commentators have pointed out that this event immediately follows the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which was covered in last week’s Gospel. In many ways, this account of Martha and Mary brings balance, and it shows us that sitting at our Lord’s feet and listening to him is as vitally important in its season as relieving distressed people. Grace reigned in both Martha and Mary, and both show us pictures of grace in different times and different ways. But today’s Gospel points out that unless we spend time with Jesus personally and privately, we will soon end up like Martha, busy but not blessed. We need to learn again those ‘rhythms of grace’ that will restore to us the joy of our salvation.

Mary chose what was truly needed, and we can make that same choice today. We, too, have the privilege of waiting upon the Lord and allowing Him to renew our strength. Then we will ***“run and not be weary, and walk and not be faint.”***¹⁰ Amen

⁹ Matthew 23:37

¹⁰ Isaiah 40:31