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The Gospel of Luke
XXXVI. Martha and Mary
Luke 10:38-42

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Two Sundays ago, we read a story about the importance of hospitality. But apparently, that's old news because this week, hospitality doesn't seem to be all that important. In the text from two weeks ago, Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples with nothing. He sends them to the surrounding villages and expects people to welcome them and feed them and care for them. Hospitality. But in this story, Jesus himself enters one of those surrounding villages. The text says, "a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house." Wonderful! She's preparing a meal. She's serving her guests. She's doing exactly what Jesus wants, right? Well, no. Not quite. Martha is wearing herself out to show him hospitality, but Jesus doesn't seem to approve. Is Jesus just being difficult to please? Is he being hypocritical? Or is there something more here that we're meant to understand? What do we do with a story like this? What, exactly, are we meant to hear from it?

Preachers for centuries have given us a wide range of interpretations. Most pit the two sisters against each other. They cast Martha as the villain. They speculate on Martha's personality flaws. She's too anxious. She has prepared too much food. She's neurotic or jealous or just plain difficult to be around. Jesus shakes his head at her. He's disappointed. "Martha, Martha. You should be more like your sister." Fair enough. But is it really that simple?

Others read the text as a lesson in family dynamics. Sometimes we preachers like to fool ourselves into thinking we're skilled therapists. I've read nearly half of a textbook on interpersonal relationships, so I consider myself an expert. Martha is clearly triangulating Jesus¹. Instead of confronting Jesus, she should instead make her complaints known directly to her sister. Case closed.

Still others have taken a more progressive approach. They say that, in this story, Jesus is displaying his radical feminism by permitting Martha's sister Mary to sit at his feet. They say that he's defying Jewish law by allowing a woman to be his disciple. But in truth, no such law existed in the Judaism of Jesus' day.² And making one up isn't exactly honest or helpful.

The menu of possible interpretations is endless. So what are *we* going to make of this familiar story? What fresh Word is the Spirit speaking to us today? Let's slow down and think about the broad outline of this short passage. A woman named Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. She has been working tirelessly to provide the hospitality that is expected of her. Her sister, Mary, on the other hand, isn't offering the help that Martha so desperately needs. Instead,

¹ (Culpepper, 1995)

² (Schaberg & Ringe, 2012)

she's listening attentively and silently to the words of this travelling rabbi, Jesus. She has placed herself at his feet in the posture of a disciple. And Jesus commends her behavior. When Martha's exasperation builds to the point where she can no longer keep silent, she comes to Jesus. She pleads with him, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

"Lord, do you not care..." What a bold question to ask. But she's not alone in asking it. In fact, it's a question that Jesus has heard before. The first time he heard it, Jesus was out on a boat with his disciples. It was evening, and they were crossing from one side of the sea of Galilee to the other. He fell asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat, but at some point during the night, a great storm arose, "and the waves were breaking onto the boat, so that the boat was already filling up [with water]."³ In Mark's gospel we hear that Jesus was awoken by his terrified disciples; "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Do you not care?

One commentator recalls the moments during his childhood when his exasperated mother would cry out from another room to nobody in particular, "No one helps me in this house!" Sure, it was a complaint that the dishes weren't clean, or the laundry wasn't folded. But hidden behind the complaint was a deeper question: "Does anybody truly see me?"⁴

Maybe that's what Martha was trying to say. "Lord, do you not care?" "does anybody care?" Just like the storm on the sea, there was a storm raging inside Martha. She was overwhelmed; anxious; exhausted. She has taken on the work of two people; from her perspective, she has been abandoned by her sister. She's ready to give up. She's at the end of her rope. The waves were breaking onto the boat, filling it up with water. "Lord, do you not care?" She comes to Jesus, not because she's a tattletale or a manipulator, but because she's desperate. "Peace! Be still!" Jesus calmed the storm on the sea. "Martha, Martha." Jesus calms the storm in Martha's soul.

Jesus does something tangible. He sees his friend in turmoil, and he offers grace and peace. Maybe it's not quite in the form that Martha requested, but it is true peace. "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." Jesus is not rebuking Martha. He's not chastising her. He's comforting her. Like a parent soothing a beloved child⁵, Jesus calls Martha by name. He acknowledges her pain. He gives her the assurance that he sees her; that she is fully known. In the words of the psalmist,

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me!
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 You discern my thoughts from afar.
 You search out my path and my lying down
 And are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 Behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.
 You hem me in, behind and before,

³ Mark 4:35-39

⁴ (Osorto, 2019)

⁵ (Leuenberger, 2022)

And lay your hand upon me.⁶

What an amazing gift of love it is to be known by the living God. Jesus sees his beloved, Martha. And in seeing her, he invites her to see himself. He offers her a new perspective; to look outside herself to see what she has been missing. The good portion, which is himself; his grace; his love. He's giving her the eyes to see it, to see him, standing right in front of her.

Jesus knows each of us in the same way. He knows who we are and where we are because he is right there with us. He is the God who delights to be with us. Last week, we heard the story of a lawyer who came to test Jesus. He said, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? [Jesus] said to him, 'What is written in the Law? How do you read it?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.' And [Jesus] said to him, 'You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.'" But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"⁷

We know what happens next. Jesus tells him the parable of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer knew the answer to his own question. Jesus knew the answer too, but Jesus also knew something else. Jesus knew the lawyer. In knowing the lawyer, Jesus knew what the lawyer needed. He had been trying to earn his salvation by keeping the law. Loving God and loving neighbor had become, for him, a task to be completed. A box to be checked. In telling him the parable, Jesus was offering the lawyer a new perspective. He was inviting him to see beyond himself. It's not possible to earn an inheritance. It is a gift. Love is a gift. Jesus was inviting the lawyer to open his arms to receive that gift.

In the very next story, Jesus goes to the home of a woman named Martha. He knows Martha. He sees her. He offers her a new perspective. He invites her to open her arms to receive the gift of his presence. To the lawyer, he says, "go and do." To Martha, he says, "sit and listen." Jesus knows them both. He knows exactly what they need. Jesus knows us too. He knows exactly what we need. That, friends, is true hospitality. To know a person. To see them, and to provide for their needs. And what we need... when everything else is stripped away... what we really need... is Jesus.

There's another story in the Bible where Jesus recognizes Martha's need. A story we know well. From the 11th chapter of John. Martha and her sister were grieving the death of their brother, Lazarus. Jesus heard about it and came to Bethany to be with them. The text says,

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and

⁶ Psalm 139:1-5

⁷ Luke 10:25-28

everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”⁸

“I am the resurrection and the life.” Again, Jesus sees Martha and, again he offers himself. The waves crashing around her once again. But this time, she doesn’t ask Jesus if he cares. She already knows that he does. This time, she has a relationship with the living God. Not only does Jesus know her, but now, she knows Jesus. She knows him because she accepted the gift. The good portion. Jesus Christ.

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⁸ John 11:17-27