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The story of Mary and Martha is another one of those very familiar stories that has oftentimes been reduced to a simple story about two sisters pitted against each other, a story of faith versus works or the contemplative life versus the active life. It also became a story for women in the 20 and 21st century about working moms versus stay at home moms. None of those concepts gets to the heart of the story.

On the surface, the story appears to be one of opposites. When Martha asks for Mary, who was spending all her time at the feet of Jesus, to help her, she appears to be criticized by Jesus. You get the impression that Jesus is telling her she should be more like Mary. It also appears that Jesus is choosing sides which, in any given situation, we so often do. When confronted with two opposing situations we fall prey to the idea that one has to be bad and the other good. Is that what Jesus is doing in this story? Is he saying Martha has chosen the bad? If that's the case, what happened to the idea of love and mercy as an action?

Look at what Jesus actually says to Martha. "Martha you are worried and distracted by many things." Jesus is not saying that the work of Martha was unimportant, but that she had become so distracted by the "many things" that she was blinded to the fact that Mary was also doing something important. One could say that Martha served and Mary listened. They both need to be held in balance.

Now if you turn to the other statement Jesus makes about Mary you heard that Mary has chosen the "better part" which has created this issue of good and bad choices. The actual Greek translates the word better as "good."

How differently would you hear the story if it were translated Mary has chosen the "good" part? Not something that is better but something that is good. What Jesus is inviting Martha to do is to set aside the distractions, to pay attention, to be still long enough to be in the Lord's presence, to listen and learn the good part, the part of God that is in our lives and the good part that leads us to our better selves. Let's face it a lot of us are easily distracted by so many things around us that we forget to stop, relax and renew ourselves. At no other time in history have there been so many types of instant distractions between our devices and social media. All of these add up to multiple ways in which any kind of focus, especially on the spiritual, can be instantly eroded.

Have you ever gone out to dinner and see a family sitting in silence and you realize that they are all on their cell-phones? This family went out to dinner to be together but chose to spend their time being distracted and removed from one another by busy-ness.

When did "busy-ness" become such a virtue that we are almost wired to let people know that we are participating at full speed in our own busy-ness whenever we are asked the question, "How are you?" How often do you respond by assuring the person with, "Oh, I am sooo busy right now?" Or, you might lead with a pre-emptive strike; "I'm sorry to be late, I'm just crazy-busy right now".

And this in no means is to diminish the fact that we are busy people. For the most part, no matter if we're retired or working, we are focused on the productivity that keeps us from being fully alive by being in our own little world instead of paying attention to the world around us.

Figuring out what is ultimately important--that's the challenge of the Gospel. Jesus talks over and over about us being the hands of Christ on earth. But ultimately it's not just about doing.

Mary has learned that there is place for praise and worship. The sacrificial service of Martha is important in the Kingdom of God. So is extravagant praise! Last week in the Gospel it was "Go and do". Today it is "Sit and listen". In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus teaches us what it means to love your neighbor. In the gospel story you heard this morning Jesus is teaching us how we love God, with presence, intention, and being still long enough to know that God is God.

Ultimately, this is what the story of Mary and Martha is about and it's unfortunate that overtime the story of these two women has been reduced to caricatures of them because they were very important in the life of the early church. Here's a sample of how the early church treated them.

First in Luke's story, this is Martha's house not Lazarus her brother. The story tells us Jesus went into HER home. His visit disrupts the Jewish law that no man of God would enter a home owned by a woman and where only women were present. Luke also tells us that Mary sat at Jesus' feet which is the position of a disciple relating to a teacher. No man ever had women for disciples, no man except Jesus. Mary and Martha had a prominent role in the life of the early church because of these and other interactions with Jesus.

Another story about Martha that gets overlooked by this one is the story of the raising of Lazarus, Martha's brother. In that story, as much as people believe the raising of Lazarus is the focal point of the story, Martha is actually the central character and it is really about the revelation that comes out of Martha.

When Lazarus was sick Martha sent a message to Jesus to let him know but Jesus didn't come even though he was a short distance away until Lazarus had been dead for four days. When she heard he was coming she met him on the road and let loose with her anger with both barrels. Martha yelled at Jesus. But then Jesus began to talk with her and she carried on a vigorous and passionate debate with him about faith. And the more their debate continued the more the realization dawned on her that Jesus indeed was the Christ, the Son of God.

Did you know that there is only one other person in the gospels that is known to have made that confession about Jesus? That person is Peter. For anyone to confess Christ in this way was the mark of an apostle. But Martha's confession has now all been but forgotten. However, for the people in the early church they did recognize Martha as an apostle. In fact there were a number of churches that were built in her honor as she was seen as the epitome of faith?

Did you know there was an even myth about how she overcame a dragon. Contrary to the story of St. George and the dragon and how he killed the dragon with his sword, the story about Martha says she encountered the dragon without killing it and overcame it without force. She did this in bare feet, dressed in a flowing robe using holy water and a cross to subdue it. She then bound the dragon with her girdle which was a symbol of purity.

But let's not forget Mary either. We also read in the Gospel of John that it is Mary that anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. Anointing one's feet models service, discipleship, and love. In this sense, John's account is more personal and raw

then the other gospels where an anonymous woman anoints Jesus' head. In a culture in which a woman's touch was often forbidden, Mary dares to spread the oil across Jesus' feet with the ends of her hair. Rather than measuring out a small amount of oil, Mary breaks the jar and lets it all pour out. This is a symbol of being all-in, fully committed, sparing no expense.

The truth of the matter is we lose so much when we try to compare Mary with Martha. As you can see neither one of them was one dimensional. Mary and Martha both represent women who had remarkable relationships with Jesus. That's what keeps getting overlooked. Not that Mary was better than Martha or Martha over Mary. That is not the point.

Jesus saw each of them as a whole person, he saw each one of them with a great deal of intellectual curiosity and someone who believed he was the Son of God. Jesus didn't ask Martha to be anybody else but Martha. He didn't want her to be Mary or Mary Martha. What he did ask of them was to find that balance we all need in our lives. It's an invitation to all of us to not only be the person that is showing and doing mercy but also the person who takes the time to sit and reflect and get renewed with God's love. So remember it's not about listening OR doing, it's listening AND doing the Word of God that makes us faithful disciples. Amen.