

Sermon: Choose the Right Thing

By Rev. Sheryl Stewart

Amos 8:1-12 Colossians 1:15- 28 Luke 10: 38-42

What we do is important, but even more vital is the company we keep as we do it. Seek, invite, the company of Jesus.

The story of Martha and Mary clearly intends to encourage us to choose the better way by offering us a contrast between the two sisters, but what is the ‘right thing’ which Mary chooses and from which Martha has been distracted by her many duties and concerns?

The lesson most commonly taught involves labeling Martha’s concerns “worldly,” contrasted with Mary’s more contemplative and spiritual focus. This suggests that seeking God leads to more lasting rewards than housework. Yet, hospitality is one of the chief spiritual virtues, expressing God’s love to friends and strangers alike.

To suggest that Bible study is where Martha’s priority should be actually runs counter to the practice we see embodied in nearly every holiness movement that is not a hermitage. The Franciscans, the Benedictines, the Jesuits, the Carmelites, and the Gray Nuns: all of them

balance prayer, study, and worship with social action. Same with the Mennonites and the Amish – through the Amish separate from the world they have each other's backs, big time. Not doing "all of the above" is what Amos said God hates. Faith and works are like the chicken and the egg: no one can tell which came first, but you never see one without the other being close at hand.

James 2: 14 says, "My brothers! What good is it for someone to say, 'I have faith,' if his actions do not prove it?" And in verse 18 & 19, James writes: "But someone will say, 'One person has faith, another has actions.' My answer is, 'Show me how anyone can have faith without actions. I will show you my faith by my actions.'"

So, what is the contrast between Martha and Mary if we think **both** Mary's faith and Martha's social concerns are validated by God? I put my imagination into this story and wondered "what if" Martha had made a different request of Jesus? Martha asked Jesus to get her sister to help her with all her concerns. She wanted Him to make her sister leave His side, where she had chosen to be. We forget what a gutsy revolutionary

Mary was: women in her age and culture did not participate in rabbinic studies. Martha wanted the gender role norm restored, but Jesus said that her sister's choice would not be taken from her.

But what if Martha had not tried to get help from her sister and asked *Jesus* to help her? In effect, what if she said, "Jesus, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all this work alone? Can you give me a hand here?" It did not happen that way, of course, but knowing Jesus' character, I suspect He would have passed on the Bible study to one of the disciples (maybe even Mary), got up, tied a towel around His waist, and gone in to do dishes at Martha's side!

You see, as I read it, the "better thing" is not works versus faith or Bible study versus hospitality. The better thing is to seek Jesus' company versus going it alone. This is the point made in the life of a rather simple man, Brother Lawrence, who was the dishwasher in his monastery. Other monks kept coming to him for advice and he eventually became the abbot. His life inspired others because, whatever he did, he practiced the presence of God.

Has anyone read, “The Shack” by William Paul Young? In it, a man grieving his daughter’s murder at the hands of a sadistic madman meets the Trinity at the backwoods shack where his daughter died. During his stay, he goes on a walk by the lake with Jesus. Jesus leads him out to walk on the water with Him. When they get back to shore, the experience has been so remarkable that the man walks out again by himself. It isn’t long before he starts to sink. Spotting Jesus watching him from the shore, he shouts: “Hey Jesus, what am I doing wrong?”

Jesus replies, “Nothing, but it is a lot easier to walk on the water if you invite me to come along with you!” There it is. This is the better thing, the best thing, the only thing! Whatever you do, invite Jesus to come along with you. Trust me – trust God – *that* won’t be taken from you!