

REMEMBER WHOSE YOU ARE

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...[T]he Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:41–42)

“Are you a Martha or a Mary?” It’s a question that sounds like a quiz from a teen girl magazine, or perhaps, today, BuzzFeed. *Answer A if you tend to be a worrier, B if you tackle things as they come. Answer A if you ever feel sorry for yourself, B if you take responsibility for your moods. Answer A if you feel better when you’re busy, B if you take time out to reflect and be present.*

In fact, I think I may have taken this very quiz at some point. The story of Mary and Martha was popular in the all-female youth groups of my childhood, and it seems to continue to be a draw. Authors have penned books like *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World: Finding Intimacy with God in the Busyness of Life*, a book that “shows women how to blend intimacy with Jesus and service for Him,” or my personal favorite, *Having a Martha Home the Mary Way: 31 Days to a Clean House and a Satisfied Soul*, essentially a housekeeping guidebook for people who are not, in the author’s terms, “natural cleaners.”

Perhaps this is not a surprise. Like the story of the Good Samaritan last week, and the Lord’s Prayer next week, today’s Gospel (Luke 10:38–42) would not be out of place in a Bible Top 40, a greatest hits sampling of popular stories. However, as with these other passages, hearing a story over and over does not always serve the story well. If too little care is taken in approaching the story of Mary and Martha, this story can turn into a moralizing weapon. It can be used to pit people against each other, seemingly elevating one role over another, or it might appear to be “all about women” and let readers neglect the bigger pictures. However, quickly drawn conclusions like these, based on memories of a story that has been told in a variety of ways, tend to miss the point.

The story of Mary and Martha is not about choosing contemplation over action or choosing being over doing. It’s not about defining the roles of women in the church—though it is one more example of Jesus welcoming the women around him to participate in his ministry in a way that seems radically incongruous with the culture of the day. In fact, the main points in this story are gender-neutral, and are as applicable and compelling today as they were in Jesus’ time.

I think part of the problem with this story is that we tend to look at it the wrong way. We see that Mary has “chosen the better part” by sitting and listening to Jesus while Martha was busy cooking and cleaning. But Martha is not being chastised for serving and Mary praised for contemplating. Jesus’ rebuke has as much to do with Martha’s attitude as with her actions. Indeed, where would we be if we were to condemn Martha for serving? Jesus calls his disciples to serve throughout the Gospels. Didn’t we hear just last week about the compelling and active service of the Samaritan man? If Jesus was saying that contemplation is always better than action, nothing would ever get done.

Surely Martha’s acts of service began as something good. She saw Jesus and his companions on the road, and she invited them into her home. When I picture this story in my head, sometimes I only see Mary, Martha, and Jesus, and perhaps a couple of other guests—but

this was likely a much larger party. We can assume it included at least Jesus and the 12, but if we've seen anything so far in Luke it's that those following Jesus included many more than the 12 disciples. Were the 70 we heard about a couple of weeks ago part of this group? How many more unnamed followers were invited in? But Martha took that risk, opened her home, and then busied herself making ready for the crowd. I'm sure she could've use all the help she could get, and was it such a stretch to assume that her sister Mary would lend a hand with the preparations?

It feels unfair that Martha is working while her sister is sitting around. And presumably Jesus and his disciples did want to eat. But Jesus says Mary has "chosen the better part." How can this be?

Martha's hospitality shines in this passage. Martha is the one doing the things we typically think of and name as hospitality ministries—she's busy cleaning and cooking and preparing the house for her guests. But Mary is being hospitable, too. Mary's attentiveness to the guest of honor, Mary's presence—this is also hospitality. And the story takes a turn when Martha gets fed up and asks Jesus to tell Mary to help with the preparations. At this moment, Martha ceases to be hospitable. She is trying to force her guest of honor to step into a relationship on her behalf.

Martha is triangulating. When she gets upset with her sister Mary, she doesn't say, "Hey, Mary, can you come help me in the kitchen? I'm swamped!" No, she goes to Jesus, presumably right in front of Mary, and she says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Now it's possible, going back to the discussion of gender roles, that Martha was asking Jesus to give this command because as the man of greatest authority in the house, he *was* the greatest authority in the house. But we've already seen Martha's authority as a homeowner and hostess, and Mary's authority to sit at Jesus' feet and learn like her male counterparts, so I don't really think this is the presenting issue at play here.

Part of the reason I think this is because jealousy and rivalry, and the triangulation and bitterness that come from these feelings run very deep in our humanity. These are such common feelings, and they are deeply imbedded in our identity and in how we react to others. I saw something online the other day, an illustrated quotation that read, "You never look good trying to make someone else look bad." Martha was trying to make Mary look bad, and it certainly didn't make Martha look good. Whether or not her frustration was justified, Martha comes across sounding petty and childish.

In fact, Martha is so consumed by what Mary is *not* doing that she can't do her work. She is driven to distraction. She has so many things on her to-do list, and on top of that has Mary to think about—she forgets herself. When she just can't take it anymore and she reaches her breaking point she blows up to Jesus, "Don't you care? Don't you care that my sister is out here while I'm slaving away in the kitchen?"

When we look at it this way, we see that Jesus' response is more compassionate than chiding. "Martha, Martha," he says, "You are worried and distracted by many things." Martha is distracted by jealousy, by self-pity, by wrongly ordered priorities. These distractions tear her focus away from what really matters, away from Jesus and his reason for being there in the first place. These distractions also turn Martha into someone else, someone she isn't. They turn a generous and hospitable host into an anxious, petulant faultfinder.

Mary and Martha didn't have Facebook, but I can't help but feel like this scene is one that's played out every day on social media platforms. Social media allow people connected to these networks to pick and choose what parts of their life they put on display. As such, the

identity one constructs on social media is a carefully curated image. This is not a problem in and of itself. The problem arises when real, imperfect, flesh-and-blood people compare themselves to carefully curated images of their friends and those they admire. “Comparison is the thief of joy,” Teddy Roosevelt once said, and for many people this is true as they see pictures of always-smiling babies, flawless selfies, immaculate houses.

Last fall, an Australian teen made the news for quitting the photo-based social media platform Instagram. She was something of an Instagram celebrity, with over 612,000 followers, and was paid thousands of dollars per post for marketing products to her followers. She was spending hours a day on photo shoots for images meant to look like casual snapshots—and she finally had enough. She writes, “I... was consumed by it. This was the reason why I quit social media: for me, personally, it consumed me. I wasn’t living in a 3D world.” Social media was distracting her from her real priorities.

And while that’s an extreme example, I wonder how many of us have not compared ourselves to someone—maybe on a social media network, or maybe elsewhere. I know there are folks here who adamantly stay off social networks, but they are not the only sources of comparison. Have you ever wondered why someone else got a promotion instead of you? Why your friends have reached parenthood or grandparenthood and left you behind? Have you seen nasty, entitled, unethical people win and good, hard-working, kind people lose? Have you ever felt like you weren’t smart enough, or good-looking enough, or successful enough? Have you ever felt like you’re simply not enough?

Thoughts like these are common. They pop into our head like a persistent whisper that won’t go away. They’re also harmful. Thoughts like these can consume us. They can make us worried and anxious, contort our priorities and distract us from what is really important. They can make us, like Martha, forget who we are.

The reading from Colossians (1:15–28) speaks to this. It’s more abstract than a story about two sisters, and a bit harder to wrap our heads around right away, but it sheds some important light on the lessons from the Gospel story. The Colossians passage tells us about the nature of Jesus Christ—who Jesus is, and who we are in relation to him. In fact, a few of the verses are known as the “Christ hymn,” so named because this passage was thought to be used liturgically in the early church, as hymnody celebrating Christ’s work in creation and in re-creation, or reconciliation.

Jesus Christ is the firstborn, the archetypal image of God. It is by him and with him and in him that “all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers.” And his glory is revealed in reconciliation. It is the end of the “Christ hymn” that tells us “in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” The point of the cross is reconciliation, uniting the world to God in peace.

This is an awe-inspiring statement, for sure. What may not be immediately obvious is that it is also a radical statement. The letter to the Colossians is written against the backdrop of the Roman Empire, a culture in which the emperor is considered a “son of god” by virtue of his lineage, in which his preeminence is utterly embedded. This is a culture that assumes Rome is the force of good holding society together against chaos, with the emperor as the head over the body of the empire. Peace—the great *Pax Romana*—was maintained... with the help of executions by crucifixion.

Today’s passage from Colossians turns these assumptions upside-down. The emperor is not a son of God; Jesus is “firstborn of all creation. Jesus, not the emperor, “is before all things,

and in him all things hold together.” Jesus is the head, and the body is not the Roman Empire, but the Church. And the work of Jesus is to reconcile all creation to God—on a cross, on the instrument of torture that the Roman Empire reserved for the worst and lowest of its residents.

Reconciliation is freedom. Freedom from the bonds and cares of the Empire. Freedom to be the men and women we are meant to be. Jesus has opened the way for us. “[Y]ou who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard...”

Through the cross we are reconciled to God, able to live in unity with God. Our task, then, is to be “established and steadfast in the faith” and to cling solidly to “the hope promised by the gospel.” Our task is to live as Christians, as followers of Jesus. The point of this Colossians passage is to remind us who read it who—and whose—we are.

Our identity is in Jesus Christ. It isn’t found in how we measure up (or don’t measure up) to others. The one true source of measurement we have is Jesus—but we don’t measure up very well in that comparison. That’s where the real good news of the Gospel comes in: Jesus has redeemed us and reconciled us to God. Our true identity is found in recognizing who we are as redeemed children of God.

When we are secure in this identity, we may be better able to look with Jesus’ gracious and compassionate eyes on others. When our identity is grounded in Christ, jealous comparisons and bitter rivalries simply do not make sense, because in Jesus we have everything we need.

Perhaps the better part that Mary chose was not defined by her decision to sit and listen, but by her anchoring her identity in Jesus. Where Mary is focused and calm, Martha is driven to anxious distraction by comparing her situation to her sister’s. Jesus is not telling us through Martha to choose worship over service. Jesus is gently reminding us to choose to stake our identity in him over relying on flimsy earthly constructions and comparisons. Jesus is reminding us of our true selves.

The Church can also serve this purpose for us. Amid the many anxieties and distractions of living, among the comparisons and frustrations and triangulations of human relationships, we come to pray and hear and be fed in order to remember who and whose we are. Then, having been fed and gently reminded of our identities, we go out into the world.

We go out to serve, to do the work God has given us to do, and we go out to learn, and listen, and be in the presence of God. Most of all, we go out with the knowledge that we are God’s beloved children, new creations reconciled through Jesus Christ.