

Martha, Martha, Martha

When you attend seminary you study the Bible. Yes, that is somewhat common sense. Yet at Seminary the Bible is studied to the point it becomes a textbook. I couldn't afford a Study Bible until I was in my last year at school, so I used a less expensive version of the New Revised Standard Version as the textbook. I still use that Bible and there are notes on most of the pages. It is a well loved book that has been showing its age for years. I don't use it as much anymore as the binding is loose and I'm afraid it will fall apart.

To anyone who regularly attends Church, and/or reads the Bible, they will be familiar with the characters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. The trio were friends of Jesus, we aren't told how they met. There are two separate occasions when Jesus is invited to their home for a meal.

For these siblings, I would say that their best known story is when Jesus came after Lazarus had died. He wept along with Mary and Martha. Each sister, in turn, asked Jesus why he had not come sooner. They could not have understood what had to happen – that Lazarus had to die in order that Jesus would resurrect him.

The next best known story is the one where Mary of Bethany, Martha and Lazarus' sister, breaks open a jar of expensive perfume and anoints Jesus' feet after washing them with her tears.

Arguably, the least known interaction between Lazarus, Martha and Mary is the one from today. Jesus has been invited to a meal and Martha has been preparing the meal and the house all day. Jesus arrives, sits down and begins telling stories and teaching. Frustrated with the lack of support from her sister, as well as EVERY OTHER PERSON in that room, Martha calls Jesus aside and asks him to tell her sister to get off her backside and help her.

Here's how it unfolds: Martha asks,

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the 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 10.40-42, NRSV)

As a student in a Church placement there was plenty of talk between the Martha's and the Mary's. Martha's were those who were always busy. Washing dishes, cooking, cleaning, doing the everyday tasks and never having time to simply sit and be.

'Mary's' were those who would stop and smell the flowers. They were not governed by time or a To Do list. They made time to listen to those around them. There was a certain amount of "caché" if you were considered 'a Martha', rather than 'a Mary'. 'Martha's' were practical and useful. 'Mary's' were flighty and easily distracted. Their worth was not easily measured, especially against the 'Martha's'.

If you were to guess which of these women I believe myself to be, who would you say?

As much as I don't like assigning labels, for the purposes of this sermon, I will do so. If you guessed I'm a 'Martha', you'd be correct.

It used to infuriate me that Martha is left alone to take care of everything while everyone else sits. I could clearly see the scenario – Mary has been pfaftering about all day, getting very little accomplished and making herself scarce whenever there was heavy or dirty work to do.

Martha has been up since the crack of dawn, baking, cooking, chopping, cleaning, sweeping, getting everything ready for their most excellent friend Jesus of Nazareth. Martha would love nothing more than to sit and listen to the teachings of Jesus, perhaps even share some of her own opinions, but she cannot bring herself to sit down until the work is finished, the kitchen tidied and swept and all the dishes put away.

She's hoping that someone will offer, after all, can they not SEE the detritus of dinner and OFFER to help, at the very least? But OH NO, she's left to do ALL of the work ALONE! She snatches up the hem of her apron and goes to Jesus asking him to back her up.

Surely to, well, Him, Jesus would understand that Martha has as much right to listen and learn as Mary and as such, he should order Mary to help Martha so they can BOTH hear Jesus' teachings.

Except, that's not what happens.

In a startling turn of events, Jesus not only refuses to order Mary or anyone else to help and instead chides Mary for misunderstanding the most important things. Uh, Jesus? Oh excuse me?

It is not Mary who broke her back getting this meal ready for those assembled, It is Martha, who only wants to be treated the same as Mary. Truthfully, Martha believes herself to be more virtuous than Mary because she's doing God's work, not merely listening to the words and daydreaming.

I would feel my chest tighten whenever this reading would come up in the lectionary because it always felt to me that Martha was being shamed in suggesting that the work should be finished before the conversation began.

I've read many commentators and different translations and paraphrases of this reading. In all of them, Martha is pleading for help, and Mary is held up as an example of what is important in the world.

And you know what? Jesus is right. Martha (*gasp*) is wrong.

All my life I've been an organizer. I'm the firstborn in my family and as such I have the quintessential traits. Organised, methodical, strong work ethic – meaning that work comes first and everything follows. I will not allow myself to participate in any fun activity until the kitchen is clean, the bed is made, the sermon is written. Does this sound familiar to anyone?

At various times in my life, I've been under the care of a counselor or therapist. I'm very blessed to have a family doctor who believes in the holistic approach to health. To keep my mental health in tip top shape I need to take time to do things that are fun and rewarding, whether or not the work is finished.

To say this in another way, I'm "allowed" to play before I finish my work. I'm encouraged to schedule a massage, or a pedicure for my physical and mental health, as much as I take antidepressants and write in a journal.

Jesus was not chiding Martha for seeking support and back-up. He was holding Mary up as an example that the work can wait, the word of God cannot. Now, in my perfectly distorted world, once Jesus finished his teaching and the conversation was winding down, Mary and all other guests would help Martha in the kitchen. We aren't told what actually happens, so please, let me have this neat and tidy ending, okay?

Mary was likely the middle or youngest sibling. She didn't have to worry about the day to day mundane stuff because she knew Martha would look after it. That gave her freedom to roam and explore. To listen and to learn. Mary wasn't lazy so much as she was more attuned to listening to the word of God.

Jesus knows that Martha is listening, even when she is not sitting in the same room with him. He wants her undivided attention. What he has to say is he doesn't have much time to teach them. He needs them all to listen and learn.

It's only in the past few years that I have seen this story from another side. Mary wants Jesus to know that she is listening and learning. Mary knows that it is quite unusual for a godly man to engage in conversation with men and women together. And she's not going to miss a single word he says.

She cannot understand why Martha is so hung up on things that are not important, when the kingdom of God is at hand!

When Jesus reacts to Martha's plea for help he says her name twice, Martha, Martha, you are distracted by earthly things which do not matter. Similar to how he said "You will always have the poor with you", Jesus is also saying "the dishes will wait, I won't always be with you."

How many of you remember The Brady Bunch? When I watched that show, even though I'm the eldest, I always felt for Jan. Remember her catch-phrase? Marsha Marsha Marsha! Did you know she only said that in one episode during the second season?

I like to imagine that Mary comes in as Jesus is talking to Martha and says, "Oh Martha, Martha, Martha, you're always so busy doing these little things that by the time you're ready to sit down, you're too tired to fully hear the message. You need to take a leaf out of my book and forget about the chores. The dishes and the housework will wait. Come and listen to our friend. We'll help you lean up afterwards.

I can take great poetic liberties with this part of the story, because we're not told what actually happens, this is simply my imagination telling me how the story should have gone. OR, what part of the story got lost in translation!

All of us possess the qualities of both women. We are able to do the work that needs to be done, whether we enjoy it or not. AND we are able to sit at the knee of the holy one and listen to their teaching.

I have been blessed a few times in my life to be in the presence of a truly holy individual. The kind of person with whom you feel the presence of the Divine through them. You could hear them speak for hours and not tire of what they have to say. Most recently this was true when I attended the PMRC AGM in Prince George. Our keynote speaker Jeff Chu spoke of the Church as a compost pile and while initially disarming, I found the analogy to be spot on.

We are at a crossroads. Whether we admit it or not, the way we have always done Church has to change. If we do not change, the Church will fail. We have learned in the last 2 ½ years that we do not need a physical building to be The Church. Our congregation has grown beyond provincial and state borders. It has grown beyond in person and online parishioners.

For some of us, we may never see each other in person, and yet we have formed a family, which three years ago would have seemed ridiculous if not impossible...and yet, here we are.

All of this to say that we ought to take a leaf out of Mary's and Jesus' books, to let the work wait until after the conversation is completed.

After all, it is exactly what Jesus DID.

Amen.

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent,
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Fernie Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican
Sermon for Pentecost 6 - 17 July 2022 - Luke 10:38-42