

Sermon
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
Sunday, July 20th, 2025
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: AMOS 8:1-12; PSALM 52; COLOSSIANS 1:15-28; LUKE 10:38-42

Am I a Mary or a Martha? How many of you have come away from today's Gospel passage asking yourself this question, either today or another time? How many of you have heard "Don't be a Martha!" from a pulpit somewhere? That's not what you're going to hear from this pulpit today. 😊

Why do we pit Mary and Martha against each other? We might say "Well, Jesus says that Mary has 'chosen the better part' - obviously Jesus is telling us to be like Mary!"

How do you hear the dialogue in this passage? Do you hear Martha's voice as angry, bitter? "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." [angry voice] or is her voice tired, overwhelmed? "Lord, do you not care..." [tired voice] Similarly, do we hear Jesus's response as dismissive, judgemental? "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted..." with a subtext of "You foolish woman!", or do we hear a gentle, encouraging voice? Do we hear a subtext of "Don't worry, Martha, it'll be ok." Do we read into this that Jesus is excluding Martha from also choosing the better part? Think of the Jesus we know in and through the Gospels, through the whole of the New Testament. Is it likely that Jesus, who ate with tax collectors and sinners, who fixed his gaze on the margins, who cared for the most vulnerable, is judging and excluding Martha in this scene? No, it's not. It's much more likely that Jesus is encouraging Martha. It's much more likely that Jesus is saying "Don't worry Martha, the dishes can wait, come and join us." Given Jesus's pushing of boundaries at other times, it could even be that he went and helped with the dishes later. We'll never know, but it could be...

I'm grateful to Sarah for pointing me to an episode of the Nomad podcast this week - a conversation with former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. The

episode is called “Christianity After Certainty” (I’ll include a link in the newsletter this week) and in it Rowan Williams differentiates between faith, and what he refers to as toxic religion. Toxic religion encourages certainty, whereas faith encourages continual growth and expansion - expansiveness. Faith maps a path of mystery, not mastery. He says: “One of the tests...for toxicity in religion is [to ask] is this a practice, a way of living, a way of talking whose cumulative effect is to make people feel less? Or is it a way of talking that allows them to expand into a space?”

This is a question worth asking ourselves every day. Does what I am doing, or saying, have the cumulative effect of making others - or me - feel less? Or is what I am doing or saying about expansion, about growth? Does what I am doing create openness and movement - and room for the Spirit - or am I closing myself and others off?

I came across this definition of sin this week:

“Sin is that which diminishes the humanity of the other or my own humanity.”

Were Martha words, her consternation at Mary, diminishing and dehumanizing? Maybe. Maybe Martha was resentful, or maybe she was exhausted and desperate. Both resentment and desperation can make us grasp for control. Both can make us seek to diminish. Perhaps Martha did want Mary to receive a divine rebuke. Yet Jesus doesn’t do that. We don’t have to hear his words to Martha as diminishing. As I’ve said, with the big picture of who and how Jesus was in mind, I think it’s highly unlikely that his words are anything other than encouraging. Though it’s not recorded in the passage, I can well imagine Jesus encouraging Martha not to serve out of obligation to gender. Not to feel that she was less than any of her brothers and sisters. I can imagine him encouraging her to come and sit with them. I can imagine him encouraging Martha not to diminish, and not to be diminished.

The idea that others have to be less so that we can be more runs deep in our humanity. The desire to feed our egos, to feel right and righteous, to feel certain and sure, runs deep. When God entered our time and space in Jesus, it was into a world with rigid boundaries, and a deep sense of scarcity - there wasn’t enough of anything to go around. There wasn’t room for everyone to grow and thrive. Jesus

came to show those who walked this earth with him, and he came to show us that it doesn't have to be this way!

I mentioned Rowan Williams' assertion that faith is not about mastery but about mystery. It's not about reaching a point where we say, with great satisfaction, "Well, I've got it all figured out!" It's not about feeling satisfied with a message in today's Gospel passage that Mary is right and Martha is wrong - with pitting them against each other - and being certain that we should all be like Mary. It is about mystery. It's about trusting that with God, nothing is impossible. It's about trusting that something more is just around the corner. It's about getting comfortable with not being certain, and with being willing to shift our position, our perspective. It's about encountering and interacting with one another not with rigid certainty, but with openness and love. It's about magnifying goodness and love in each other and in our world!

Does Jesus encourage us to be present to him in our lives, to be aware of his presence connecting us to God? Yes - *and* Jesus knows our struggles, our worries, our distractions, and he holds those things with us. We are not meant to pat ourselves on the back, pleased with ourselves for making time to sit at the feet of Jesus in prayer, and neither are we meant to berate ourselves for becoming overwhelmed, worried, and distracted at times. We are not meant to compare ourselves to others and feel superior or inferior - both have a diminishing effect! We're not meant to interact with each other with righteous indignation, certain that we're right and the other is wrong - this too, has a diminishing effect.

Following Jesus, apprenticing ourselves to him, if you will, means a commitment to movement, and growth, and change. It means a commitment to being aware of our words, our actions. It's a commitment to asking ourselves not just once, but continually, if our words and actions have a diminishing effect on ourselves, on others, and on our world.

Jesus shows us a God of love, not one of condemnation and judgement. Jesus shows us that God loves us, that God wants us to thrive and grow into our fullest selves. God came to us in Jesus to magnify, not to diminish!

May God's goodness and love be magnified in this place, and in each of us here this morning. May that goodness and love uphold us when we leave this place, giving us the energy, the will, the desire, not to diminish, and not to be diminished as we face all the ups and downs, all the joys and sorrows of this world, this life. Go, and don't worry about being a Mary or a Martha. Go, and be a follower of Jesus, with a faith that magnifies, in his name. Amen.