

The Better Part

Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

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Have you ever wondered how the story would have gone if Martha had simply said, “Mary, could you give me a hand in the kitchen?” Mary, of course, might have said no or maybe Jesus would have said, “Martha, just come sit. Don’t worry about the meal. Let’s spend some time together.” Or Mary could have hopped up and said, “Sure, Martha. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you needed help.” I can imagine that Mary may have gotten angry and said, “Jesus, Martha is always on my case. I never do enough as far as she is concerned, could you tell her to get off my back?”

So often, our first move is to try and get Jesus on our side, rather than sitting at his feet. And why do we struggle with just asking for what we need? Saying directly what’s on our mind? Instead, we engage in those parking lot conversations we are so familiar with, you know, the meetings before and after the meeting. The text chain during the family gathering. The phone calls afterwards. The “can you believe” or the “what are we going to do about” exchanges with those we think will agree with us. The “we’ve got to do something about this” and “why don’t others get it” conversations that feel good in the moment but erode trust and poison community over time.

We’ve all had them, all participated, initiated, or failed to stop them. And, in the church, we even try to make Jesus complicit with them. We huddle with our faction within the household of God and convince ourselves that our perspective is synonymous with Jesus’, opinions, our thoughts, and ways God’s very own. Our ego or our anxiety or our need to be right or our fear of change, loss, death, rejection, irrelevance, insert your favorite fear here, causes us to hijack Jesus for our purposes rather than align ourselves with his will.

Martha is representative of each and every one of us when we’re overwhelmed with circumstances or feelings or fears, we don’t want to face head on. Martha makes the all-too-human-move of focusing on someone else’s perceived problem instead of asking for what she needs.

But here’s the thing, in the words of pastor and therapist Peter Steinke, “Nothing is more difficult to confront than hidden complaints.” (*Healthy Congregations*, page 61)

He goes on to add, “Critical judgment does not change anyone or anything in the universe. If you dislike someone or react negatively toward a certain behavior, it does not change the person or the behavior you are judging. When you judge another critically, you do not define that person.

You define yourself. Your harsh judgment says something about you. It describes your likes and dislikes. Accusation— ‘you, you, you’—is really about ‘me.’” (ibid, page 63)

Martha’s complaint to Jesus about Mary is really about Martha. Hence, Jesus’s response isn’t, “You are right, I am going to go set Mary straight!” But instead, “Martha, Martha...”

Family therapist Kathleen Smith says, “It is a convincing, satisfying story when there are people to blame and villains to label.” However, as Christians our posture is to be one of humility, at the feet of Jesus, listening to and learning his teachings. Only then will we mature in Christ and cease to be distracted by so many lesser things. (Seeing the Whole Elephant, blog post from the Anxious Overachiever)

I confess that I am spiritually high maintenance. I need to work really hard at not being judgmental or petty or cynical or self-centered. I catch myself often wanting affirmation for my biases, support for my righteous indignation, people assuring me that Jesus is certainly on my side. In my honest conversations with my Lord, I’ve been known to rant about perceived slights, others’ wrong-headed opinions, all the ways I am diligent while I question others sincerity, motives or actions.

I suspect this is true for most people. It has to do with being human and that thing called sin. However, it is a particular hazard for those immersed in the church. We imagine that our opinions and perspectives and endeavors are not only holy but wholly divine, slipping into self-righteousness and assuming Jesus is just as mad at whoever we are mad at in any given moment. Hence, we’d better be intentional about sitting at Jesus feet, daily, lest we start believing we are more than one beggar showing another where to find bread, something other than a sinner saved by grace, one for whom Christ died, like everyone else.

We need, moment by moment, to prayerfully ask for the Spirit to show us what will bring us closer to Christ and what things, even good things, even serving Jesus things, distract us from his Word.

It is interesting in this short exchange that the word Martha uses for “help” as in, “Jesus, tell Mary to help me” is used one other place in the New Testament and it is Romans 8, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.”

Martha doesn’t need Mary’s help so much as she, and we, first and foremost need the Spirit’s. In all our troubles, and anxieties, it isn’t lining up allies that will alleviate them. It isn’t other people’s “attention, assurance, approval or agreement” that will give us abundant life, the peace that passes understanding or a fullness of joy. (*Everything Isn’t Terrible*, Kathleen Smith, page 27.) It is sitting at Jesus’ feet, resting in his presence, listening to the living Word that will assure us that we are enough, created and claimed by God, and therefore able to set aside our distractions and rest, knowing we are saved by faith through grace and that’s all the justification we need.

At the end of the day, at the end of my life, I don't want to look back and realize I've squandered my time on unnecessary things, distractions to what truly matters. I don't want to have justified myself but failed to know Jesus and love others. I don't want my service to be colored by resentment or my hospitality with cynicism. I don't want my fears to overwhelm God's perfect love freely given in Jesus Christ for all of creation, not just those I see on my side or in my tribe. I don't want to be so worried about what others think of me that I lose sight of the truth that God's judgment is all that counts. I don't want a deep resume but shallow relationships. I don't want people to speak well of me, but my family not recognize the person they are talking about. I don't want to exchange salvation for success. I want to be free to focus on my Lord so that I can see everything else rightly, through the eyes of Christ, knowing nothing is more important than my relationship with my Savior.

That's why moment by moment I need to ask for the Spirit's help to show me what will bring me closer to Christ and what is a distraction from his Word. That's why, moment by moment, I need to ask you for help, too. I need to be honest when I am overwhelmed or afraid, irritated or hurt, anxious or sad, knowing that, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we belong to each other through and in Jesus Christ. Therefore, "We thank God for giving us siblings who live by His call, by His forgiveness, and His promise. ...And is not what has been given to us enough: siblings who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of His grace? Is the divine gift of Christian fellowship anything less than this, any day, even the most difficult and distressing day? Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ?" (*Life Together*, page 28)

No matter our distractions or disappointments, what is happening in the world, the struggles in our individual lives, are we not still sisters invited to sit at the feet of our Lord?

I happen to have a sister, one who is really good at festive gatherings, gifted at hospitality, a consummate hostess, extroverted, gregarious, excellent cook, legendary party-thrower. In other words, all the things I am not. I show up to the celebrations to which she so kindly invites me, her friends, mine, she says, and I wonder if she wants to pull Jesus aside and say, "Could you get her to help me? She's contributed nothing to this event or any other one, for that matter." But then those friends of hers pull me aside and say, "I've heard so much about you! She is so proud of you." That's when I realized she doesn't need me to do more for her. She's content for me to be more with her. And I know without a doubt she would do anything in the world she could for me. All I have to do is ask.

Maybe that would have been true of Mary, too, if Martha had given her the chance. Time and time again, I've known it to be true of the Body of Christ, those who have sat at the feet of Jesus, listened well, and really want to live what they've learned. They want to fulfill the promises they make to those baptized into this family of faith. They find meaning and purpose in helping other people and they know the joy of being cared for when they are on the receiving end of cards,

casseroles and prayers. They want to serve like their Savior, undistracted and with love. Often, they don't even need to be asked. If they know of a need, they do everything in their power to meet it because they love the Lord their God and they want to love their neighbors as themselves.

Peter Steinke writes, "What is unknown and concealed cannot be healed." Perhaps that is why sitting, and listening is so important, first to Jesus and then to each other. Only then will we hear God's Word and see Christ in one another, able to discern the better part in everyone, because we know what, and who, truly matters.