

## Choose The Better Part

Pastor John Klawiter

July 17, 2022

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Grace and peace to you my siblings in Christ,

I've had a lot of time in the car this week driving back and forth from Camp Ripley.

I listened to Luther Seminary's Sermon Brainwave podcast with three of the professors who talk about the readings for each week.

It's a great resource to hear their theological perspective on the text, especially this one from Luke's gospel that Evie just read.

But like I said, I had a lot of time... so I listened to the podcast from this year... but also three years ago, the last time Mary and Martha were in the cycle.

Then, I listened to three years before that.

I noticed something.

Professor Matthew Skinner began each discussion of Luke with the observation "wow, this is a really hard text."

Professor Karoline Lewis agreed with him.

This might be surprising to you. If you've heard this passage before, it might feel familiar and straight-forward. **Are you a Martha or a Mary?** The implications suggest a lot about your method of discipleship.

**Martha**, the worker, the woman whose hospitality is so important that she misses the cues to sit and listen to Jesus. For some reason, despite her obedience, Martha gets reprimanded. Really?

Then we have **Mary**, who foregoes her obligation to serve by immersing herself in the words of Jesus.

Then, gets complimented by it. This is confusing, too, isn't it?

**Skinner** (slide of Skinner) said this oversimplification is unhelpful. He does lift up three reasons why the passage is tough for us to discern.

1<sup>st</sup>, it's not exactly clear what Jesus is talking about in verse 42 when he says:

*there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

2<sup>nd</sup>, the interpretative history of the text is hard because it's interpreted as a zero sum game, for Mary to win, Martha has to lose.

And 3<sup>rd</sup>, it's been treated as a passage about women.

Because it's one of the few passages in the gospel that has female characters, and one of them who speaks, it's become a passage about women's discipleship.

There's a sense that being a hardworking Martha is an unfair label—why would we criticize someone willing to work hard and care about their work? At the same time, lazy Mary isn't fair either.

**Professor Lewis** (slide of Lewis) wisely chimed in that the either/or—are you a worker or a contemplator isn't helpful. She suggested thinking about this as a both/and. Both hospitality through service AND being open to hearing God's call—not being too busy to listen to God—are valuable characteristics of a disciple.

Minimizing our discipleship model to these two brief glimpses of two characters is not doing either disciple, Martha OR Mary, any justice.

Maybe the takeaway shouldn't be whether we're a Martha or a Mary. What if it's about the relationships we have with siblings or friends and our methods of communicating?

Did you notice the tactic that Martha uses when she gets anxious about the work not being done?

Her relationship with her sister, in my opinion, is FAR more relatable to us. The way she triangulates Jesus to try to get him on her side is a FASCINATING window into our own habits.

Edwin Friedman wrote a lot about triangles, especially in church systems.

**Friedman writes, "An emotional triangle is any three members of any relationship system or any two members plus an issue or symptom."**

Jesus hasn't said anything critical of the hospitality. He hasn't insisted to Martha to come sit down. Jesus isn't upset at all.

But Martha, perhaps anxious about what Jesus must be thinking of her home, wants to get in front of potential criticism.

"Jesus, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself? Tell her to help me!"

Who **doesn't** Martha speak to? Mary.

What does Jesus have to do with the relationship between the sisters? Why should Jesus be the one to tell Mary to get to work?

Jesus doesn't fall for the trap. Indeed, he turns the tables on Martha with this odd comment about Mary choosing the better part, but he also calls out the real issue. It's not Mary.

It's Martha's worry. "Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

Of course Martha is worried about what Jesus will think about her house. Of course Martha is worried that Jesus will judge her cooking. Of course Martha is worried that

the son of God will believe that she is a bad disciple because she can't even get her lazy sister off the floor to get up and help her.

It really has nothing to do with Mary.

And Jesus knows that.

Martha, don't choose worry and anxiety. Choose to be present in this moment, right here. When Mary chooses the better part, isn't it clear that Jesus is selecting the way without anxiety? When in God's presence, we don't need to worry.

Not always easy though, is it? Can you relate?

I know I can. If we think about it, we've probably been in all three parts of the triangle at some time in our lives.

There's the person who is anxious, so they try to pull in person B to put down person C—to make themselves feel better or to look superior to them.

This is the gossiper. The one who thrusts their anxiety on the whole group. Everyone else might be non-anxious and feeling satisfied with their situation. Suddenly, someone points out all the things that could happen that are scary.

What happens? Their anxiety is like ink in water—it spreads!

When we are the ones getting sucked into that anxiety, it's really tempting to give in and agree. We don't want the person to think we're against them. We like the gossip and wanna be in on the dirt against the other friend or family member.

It is not easy to be like Jesus and deflect the triangulation effort that Martha tried to do.

I listened to a conversation this past week between two women who were friends. The one woman was frustrated that she wasn't getting promoted to the position she thought she deserved.

She threatened to quit.

The other friend listened, but instead of getting sucked into the triangle and agreeing with her, she nimbly was able to deflect.

"Oh, I'm sorry that you felt that way."

Then, she started to throw another co-worker under the bus who she deemed entitled and complained about their lack of leadership or inability to get her what she wanted.

Instead of agreeing with her, the friend said, "That's not my experience in working with him."

She listened and supported the friend without getting stuck in the triangle. It was refreshing to hear how healthy she was in the conversation.

It didn't offend her friend. It didn't create additional conflict. Instead, she owned her own truth and self-awareness of her relationships. Just because the other woman had

negative opinions about people or the situation, she didn't allow that to change her opinion on those people.

She was choosing the better part. She was choosing not to match the anxiety of her friend.

Being a disciple is hard. But it can be even harder when we are trying to do everything, or when we compare ourselves to other churches, or when we compare ourselves to other Christians. It's not a ranking system.

When you're getting pulled into a triangle, remember that it's usually not about you. Deflect. Establish healthy boundaries. Resist contributing to gossip—remember the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment!—and resist adding anxiety into a system.

There's a lot we could be anxious about. We might have worries or fears about the future. We might wonder what is in store for the church, how will our faith be tested. God doesn't want us to live like that. Don't let worry consume us. Don't create drama where it isn't needed. That is choosing the better part. Choose the better part and live. Amen.