

“MARTHA AND MARY – A DIFFERENT LOOK”
SUNDAY, ORDINARY 16 C 2022
FOR JULY 17, 2022 – ST. PATRICK CATHOLIC CHURCH

The name Martha has become synonymous with overwork and underappreciation. So much so, that “A Martha” is sometimes used to describe a woman who is, well, a little too busy for her own good.

And she is often given the short end of the stick in our thoughts, our homilies, and maybe even in our respect. One preacher even described Martha as a woman who “Interrupted Jesus to talk about chores.”
Yikes.

For some, a “Martha” is the typical martyr; a woman whose good works are dished up with a side of commentary, and a pinch of complaint.

Teachings on this passage often focus on the tension between two approaches to discipleship, such as: *Living a Mary Life in a Martha World*, or *The Practical Life of Service Vs. The Spiritual Life of Contemplation*, or *To Do or To Be*, and then proceed to offer guidelines for women’s ministry.

Often,
interpretation of this passage
proposes the rather obvious insight
that we're called to be
both Martha and Mary.
We are called to find balance
between the busy Martha
and contemplative Mary
that lie within each of us.

And there is nothing wrong
with these interpretations,
(except for the blatantly condescending ones),
and there's much to be said
for those that point out the need
to balance the tension between
action and reflection,
doing and being.

But scripture is never easy,
And even the simplest and most straightforward
teachings of Jesus are rich and complex,
filled with invitation, challenge, and surprise.

For such a brief passage,
this story has many variations.
The original text uses verbs
that may be translated more than one way--
options that can completely change the meaning.
And there are disconnects that are hard to explain.

Maybe most important:

Why are Martha's actions unsatisfactory?

In his own ministry,
Jesus emphasizes feeding people,
providing wine and bread and fish;
dining, sharing, offering radical hospitality
to the point where he and his disciples
are even criticized for it.

Why is Martha criticized for doing what Jesus himself did?

Even if we struggle for balance
between contemplation and action, this is puzzling,
since in this passage, these options are seen as
mutually exclusive,
diametrically opposed,
with one option being approved
and the other rejected.

*Sorry, Martha,
but Mary has chosen the better part.*

Is this a cautionary tale
about the spiritual danger
of busyness severed from
prayer, reflection, and study?
Is it a reminder that prayer comes before service?

Or is it not really about Martha at all,
but a statement about women's discipleship and study,
a formal blessing for women like Mary—
like those who choose to "sit at the Master's feet"
together with the men?

Is it a radical affirmation
challenging the traditions of the day?

Is this the narration of an event in the life of Jesus,
presented as it happened,
or is it,
as Scripture scholars suggest,
an incident that has been shared
through the lens of Luke's early Christian community;
a community that may have been struggling
to ultimately re-define
women's roles in leadership, study, discipleship,
and *diakonia*--service?

The text itself does not explicitly refer to a meal,
and it does not place Martha in the kitchen
or behind a broom—
that is our own story,
our own image,
our own assumption,
our own broom.

The text, in fact, uses the word, "*diakonia*" for Martha's work;
a word Luke uses eight times.

Diakoneo can mean *waiting upon*,
helping to support, doing the work, serving, preparation,
it can mean many things—
and, among them,
ministry in the name of the Church.

Is it possible that Martha's distress
doesn't originate in cooking, cleaning,

or being relegated to the kitchen
but in something deeper?

Martha's state is typically translated as,
"distracted, overburdened, busy"
but that verb used can also commonly mean,
"to be pulled or dragged away."

So, does Martha's frustration
emerge from pain over a "pulling away"
or "taking away"
of her place and role in ministry?

Is Martha a cautionary tale for the overwhelmed?
Or do we hear in Martha,
the anguished voice of a woman
who sees her role and her ministerial responsibilities
being pulled away,
diminished, dismissed,
and calling on her sister in ministry to come to her support?

And Mary...
Is Mary the new model of women's discipleship?
Someone equal in dignity,
equal in responsibility,
boldly claiming her space among the men,
or is she a figure that illustrates
the importance of women keeping silence?

I don't know.

And none of the brilliant scholars

who study this story seem to know, either.
All we can do is view Mary and Martha and Jesus
through the eyes of faith
and through our own experience
and reflect on the possibilities—
knowing and trusting
that Christ is with us in our reflection.

So, what is the truth about Martha and Mary?

For me, it is enough to know that their faithfulness,
their courage to love and serve
and yes, lead,
is an inheritance that was
passed from mother to daughter,
shared from sister to sister,
proclaimed from disciple to disciple,
lived out by women of faith throughout the generations--
whatever their station,
whatever their circumstance,
whatever their choices,
whatever their struggles,
whatever their personal response to God's call.

. . . and for that, I for one, am grateful!