

Sermon

Pastor Elise Scott

Note: *This is the sermon from last week, July 17.*

Yesterday morning, I attended a funeral via live stream for a beloved friend, Mrs. Cobb. As is often the case at funerals, there came a time in the service for remembrances, and when it got to that point the pastor called forward the two people who were to give her eulogies: her son-in-law John, and Mary Martha, a former student and dear friend.

I was immediately struck when the pastor called out the name “Mary Martha,” for obvious reasons. While I’m sure most people in the congregation had no idea that that was the assigned lectionary text for today, it was of course front and center on *my* mind, because I had been dwelling in the story all week. But as coincidental as it seemed that one of Mrs. Cobb’s eulogists’ names was Mary Martha, it also couldn’t have been more fitting. Because you see, Mrs. Cobb intertwined the qualities of Mary and Martha into her life better than almost anyone I’ve ever met.

Mrs. Cobb had studied Latin and music in college, and she spent her career as a Latin teacher and as a church musician, serving as a substitute organist for churches in her Charlotte area long after she retired as a teacher. As you can imagine, studying Latin and music enabled Mrs. Cobb to hone the contemplative skills that we hear from Mary this morning. Mrs. Cobb loved dwelling in ancient texts and in music she found a way to connect with others and with God, that went beyond words. Additionally, as Mary Martha pointed out, as she remembered the many ways that Mrs. Cobb had impacted her life and the lives of many other students, she explained that Mrs. Cobb had a gift of seeing beyond the facades her students tried to present, and instead she would hone in on what was really going on in their lives. She had a gift for witnessing her students’ strengths, and their struggles. A gift that required her mindfulness, to really pay attention to her students, in order that she could discern what was actually going on in their lives, and not what they were presenting to her.

But Mrs. Cobb wasn’t just a Latin teacher and a church musician. She was also the wife of a Lutheran pastor, and so in this capacity, she imbued the characteristics of Martha that we hear today, serving in so many different capacities within the churches that her husband pastored and always doing for others, in her teaching and in her life as a pastor’s wife. Indeed in her 97 years of

life, Mrs. Cobb beautifully entwined the characteristics of both Mary and Martha, that we hear today.

And that it only seemed appropriate that one of the people giving her eulogy would be named “Mary Martha.” The seemingly effortless way in which Mrs. Cobb webbed both Mary and Martha in her life of service and ministry would almost make us think that the two distinct personalities and skill sets of each woman in today’s story complement each other without any trouble. Even in fact, the name of Mrs. Cobb’s eulogist belies this fact: Mary Martha, not Mary *and* Martha, as though all of us can just as effortlessly embrace both skill sets, making it hard to believe that there could be any underlying tension or family system drama in the story that we hear today.

And yet the story that we hear today tells us otherwise! Unfortunately, we don’t get a lot of details in today’s story. Our Gospel text after all, is only five verses long. Thus, we’re left to fill in many of the details ourselves. But we do get a few details, enough to discern without a doubt that there is most certainly some tension between Martha and Mary. Though it’s difficult to tell if it’s only on Martha’s behalf, or if in fact both sisters find the behavior of the other one to be less than desirable. Despite the scant details we’re given however, we are told that Jesus has entered the village of Mary, Martha, and presumably their brother Lazarus, though he’s not mentioned in this text this morning. And as such, we’re told that Martha has welcomed Jesus into her home.

No doubt Martha wanted to be a hospitable host. It was her role as the female of the house to ensure that Jesus and his followers that accompanied him were welcomed and fed. It was simply expected, and I imagined that Martha probably even *wanted* to play this role, not just because it was expected of her, but because she loved Jesus. He was a dear friend of their family. (Again, this detail is not included in our story today, but when we hear about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in the Gospel of John, we are told in fact that they are good family friends.) But also, no doubt, this entailed a lot of work for Martha. And all the while, while Martha toils around, ensuring that her guests are well fed and well cared for, Mary just sits at the Lord’s feet, listening to what he’s saying. And that, somewhat unsurprisingly, Martha goes up to Jesus and says, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me!”

I feel like it’s important for me to point out here that I have a distinct bias in regard to this text. I tend to take Martha’s side on this one, and it’s probably

because for as long as I can remember, my mom has pointed to this Bible story whenever my sisters and I have failed to assist her in preparing for company when we're home. Undeterred by the fact that Jesus goes on to, as some commentators say, "gently rebuke" Martha, or even by the fact that Jesus goes so far as to say that "Mary has chosen the better part," my mother nonetheless passionately contends that Martha was right in this situation; that it wasn't fair that Mary got to sit at Jesus's feet, appearing to do nothing but sit there, and that Martha knew *someone* had to do the work or it wouldn't get done!

And thus, I, too, have developed this bias towards Martha and the story. (Though in full disclosure, my mom often had to tell this story to me, because I would be sitting around reading instead of helping. It's more often than not, I tend to be more like Mary than Martha.) And yet I still sympathize with Martha, as I'm sure many of you do. Haven't we all been there at one time or another? Where it seems like we're the only ones doing the work, we're the only ones pulling our weight, while everyone else just gets to sit around and visit and have a good time enjoying each other's company? Is it ever any fun to be the person stuck in the kitchen, preparing plates of food, washing dishes, making to-go plates for your guests?

And yet, Jesus seems to point us in another direction this morning. He fails to take Martha's side. He refuses to tell Mary to stop sitting at his feet and listening to him in order that she may help her sister.

Which, as an aside, is pretty groundbreaking of Jesus. Having Mary sit and learn from him broke through all the norms of gender roles at that time. And yet Jesus here seems to encourage Mary to be his student, to defy the strict gender roles that their culture would have limited her to.

But not only does Jesus refuse to intervene and force Mary to start helping Martha, he seems to tell Martha that she is *wrong* to be fulfilling her duties, like she is, saying, "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."

I must confess, I really wish the story didn't end here. I would love to have seen or heard how Martha reacted to this, because again, and full disclosure, I can only imagine what kinds of expletives *I* might have yelled at Jesus had I been Martha in this story! Though multiple commentators argue that Jesus is trying to be gentle, contending that because he uses Martha's name not once, but twice, he must not have had a malevolent or patronizing tone. Yet I feel certain that had I

been Martha, I would have been livid at how patronizing it sounded to me. Honestly, I think I probably would have stormed out, yelling behind me as I left that Jesus and his disciples could “just fix their own dinner, then, if that’s how he felt!” After all, Martha is probably exhausted and even a little hungry from all of her hard work. And so she’s probably not thinking or reacting with her best self.

But unfortunately, we don’t get to see how Martha responds. And we don’t even get to hear the tone Jesus uses. It’s really all just conjecture. And yet there is plenty of conjecture on what Jesus meant here. Because it’s difficult for us to believe that right after the telling of the story of the Good Samaritan, a story that’s all about acting on the needs of others and serving your neighbors, that we would have Jesus say in no uncertain terms that “Mary has chosen the better way,” as though a contemplative life is more worthy than a life filled with acts of service.

Of course, all the commentators attempt to explain this away, saying that of course both are needed; that one’s *not* really better than the other, just that in order for us to even know how to serve, we must build and grow our contemplative relationship with God, spending time at Jesus’s feet and prayer, reading scripture, listening to what Jesus is teaching us, and where God is leading us.

And of course, we do attempt to explain this exchange between Martha and Jesus away, because we know that without the work of Martha, nothing would ever get done. In our churches, for example, we wouldn’t have coffee hours, potluck suppers, and we certainly wouldn’t be able to organize drives for healthcare kits, school kits, and quilts to send to refugees all over the world, or to provide dinner for youth at New Horizons, like your congregation does. We clearly can’t spend all day, every day, sitting in prayer and meditation, never even attempting to leave our cocoons.

And yet there’s no denying, even with all of our explaining and justifying, that Jesus says this morning in this Gospel text that “Mary has chosen the better way.” Though he doesn’t exactly clarify what the better way is. To be honest, I’m still a little uncertain about what to make about this exchange between Martha and Jesus, despite having done a lot of reading on it. To say that I was underwhelmed by most of the arguments the commentators make, would be an understatement. For the most part, I found none of their arguments compelling. However, there were a couple from which I think we can all glean a little wisdom on what Luke may be trying to teach us in the story.

First, commentators noted throughout, that this story directly follows the story of the Good Samaritan, as has already been mentioned. Thus one commentator pointed to the words of the lawyer in last week's Gospel text – perhaps you remember them – that when Jesus asked him, what it meant to gain eternal life, what he must do, he answered that “We must love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind, and that we must also love our neighbors as ourselves.” Thus this commentator contended that while Luke used the story of the Good Samaritan to teach us what it means to love our *neighbors*; Luke uses *this* exchange between Jesus and Martha, to teach us what it means to love *God*, to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind.

I think this could be true.

And not only that, I think that if it is true, then perhaps it's true that somehow the qualities of Mary and of Martha complement each other, rather than compete with each other. Because truly, we can hardly separate our love of God from our love of neighbor. They flow into and out of each other seamlessly. We can't love our neighbors without the love of God emanating from us, and our love of God seeps out and through us, through our love of neighbor. They are intricately connected.

And then finally, another commentator contends that Jesus begins by protesting that only a few things are needed or even wanted for the meal itself. And thus as an afterthought, Jesus adds that only one thing is needed – his teaching – since Martha is so taken up with meal preparations that it appears to be consuming her above all else. And again, I find some validity to this argument, if for no other reason than my own personal experiences – perhaps your experiences also cause this argument to resonate with you – because the truth is, when we become so focused on the details of preparing for a perfect dinner party for our guests, we forget to look at the whole picture. That what makes a good dinner party is not that the table is perfectly set or that we serve only the fanciest of foods. It's the *communion that happens around the table* that matters. The sharing of the bread and wine, the sharing of laughter, the sharing of stories and experiences, the sharing of ourselves. And perhaps that is what I find most compelling of all. Regardless of exactly what tone Jesus used with Martha or how she reacted to it, ultimately, Jesus's goal for Martha, and for Mary, and for us, is always the same. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.”

And Jesus knows, as he tells Martha and us this morning, that abundant life comes through our relationships. It comes through our relationship with God, our relationships with others. It comes through a sense of deep community and the abiding love that we find when we share community with one another. This morning, Jesus reminds us that if we become so encumbered by the details, we may also lose sight of what's most important: the people that surround us. Our relationship with God. Maybe, just maybe, it's possible for us, like Mrs. Cobb, to embody both Mary and Martha; to find God as much in acts of service as when we sit at the feet of Jesus.

Because really, in the end, the only thing that matters in this story is that Jesus wants to be in relationship with Mary, just as much as Jesus wants to be in relationship with Martha. And this story reminds us that no matter what, whether we're sinner or saint, Martha or Mary, contemplative, or a "doer," Jesus loves us just as we are, and wants nothing more than for us to be in relationship with him, to sit at his feet, to tell him of our joys and our sorrows, our worries and our hopes, and to let him accompany us all along the way through this pilgrimage of life.

Praise be to God.

Amen.