

What is Balance? The Rumble Luke 10: 38- 42, Mary and Mary
 Rev. Pat Weatherwax July 21, 2019

INTRODUCTION

Two quick points of introduction. There are many things to consider when reading and studying and applying scripture. We usually take a small section at a time, and take it at face value. It's important to read the verses surrounding a passage, to have the context. The Good Samaritan (last week) was about going out of your way to serve. Then immediately following that comes Mary of Bethany. She's *not at all* worried about serving. These are adjoining texts, which suggest balanced teaching by Jesus. Balance, important to a thoughtful helpful Christian life.

And it's important to consider what other Biblical books say about a topic. Scholars debate which Mary is who, in the New Testament. *Mary* and its variations was a common name, just like here and now. But in the gospel we call John (11:2) Martha's sister is identified as Mary, "the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair". Other places call that *Mary*, Mary Magdalene or Mary of Magdala, not Mary of Bethany. In the grand scheme there may have been many Marys besides Jesus' mom, or one, or two with similar, common names. So we consider the variations and possibilities, but don't get bogged down in them. The characters are sort of place holders- and we can put ourselves in their place, in the story.

CONTEXT

Just a quick shout out, applause, to the deacons and other persons of this church, who do so many acts of service. Deacon comes from the Greek word for service. And here, where it says Martha was distracted by many tasks, in the Greek it says something like 'polydeaconism' or "a whole lot of serving". We know this church is one that values learning *and* doing. We have lots of Marthas, which is helpful, right? Well, in this account, Mary, the one who was acting like a disciple, which was traditionally a male role, is the hero of the story. Women were not considered disciples- they were not "allowed" to sit and listen. There was always work to be done, especially when there was an honored guest in the house. We sang it. Remember to: "Take Time to be Holy". That's what Mary did: sit at Jesus' feet and listen. That is the posture of a disciple.

Jesus suggests we take time to sit still and listen, sometimes. Like last week there's understandable human behavior and then there's Jesus' suggested better behavior. Again, like last week, Jesus didn't shame or blame the one who chose a logical course of action, like the priest, or Levite **or** Martha **or** Mary.

Every English Bible translation gets it: Jesus *answered* or *said* or *replied* to Martha's complaint about her sister. It's us readers and some commentators who assume Jesus rebuked, scolded, or chided Martha for her fussing. Jesus is gentle. We are the ones who like to put words in his mouth or decide that his tone was critical and caustic. Jesus said Mary chose the "better part" not the only way, not even necessarily, the best way.

It is a curious aside, the phrase that Jesus said to Martha. "Few things are necessary or only one"? What does that mean? We can only speculate. My favorite suggestion is that Martha was going overboard with the meal choices, like some of us do at Thanksgiving, or when entertaining guests. Jesus suggests only a few dishes or even just one- maybe just some bread? He may have been referencing a well-known phrase from God's instruction cited in Deuteronomy, that Jesus quoted when tempted: "We don't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deuteronomy 8:3 & Matthew 4:4). We feast on the word of God. Jesus, the word made flesh, for us and our salvation.

LESSONS

So what lessons do we learn from this text? We learn that context matters. This reading directly follows the Good Sam sermon. It's not always- "go and do". It's not always "sit and listen". So, which is better, faith or works? The biblical answer is "Yes". Does it please God and give God glory? Or is the motive for ourself, our glory, our reputation, or even our love of learning? "Where does our passion meet the world's need?" (F. Beuchner)

We might as well continue with another brief lesson in Reformed theology. Last week I mentioned "Total Depravity"- not that we are always nasty people, but that we can never be perfect; we will always make mistakes or miss the mark. We are human, not God.

Another point in theology that fits a bit with Mary and Martha, and us, is "Unconditional Election". Sounds heavy. It's actually comforting to our weakness. If God wants you, God gets you! Generally that means God is always in charge. I've appreciated the way Dr.

Carlson explains this: “God always makes the first move”. Like the verse I read with the new members, last week, I remind you of what Jesus said, recorded in John 15:15-16:

“You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn’t choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit.”

Like when visiting us, as Jesus did with his friends, Mary and Martha, we are being asked to sit quietly, so we can be inspired to serve as needed and called.

There might also be a lesson in Jesus’ projected path. Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem and the cross. Maybe he wanted a peaceful visit over fuss. Like Martha, our preferred way of helping, may not be the preferred way of the one we want to help. When in doubt, ask. Both Mary and Martha needed to have more conversations with Jesus. (Maybe us, too.) How can I best serve you, Jesus?

There are a few accounts of Mary and Martha in the gospels that help us know more about them. With the relationships that we get to choose, that is friends and lovers, often opposites do attract. With our siblings, if we have them, we are all a bit different and not really together by choice. Same with the church family. William Barclay, who wrote studies on all the New Testament scriptures, described the sisters as having a “clash of temperaments”. If you ever approached me to “discuss” a clash of temperaments, a conflict, something with your biological sibling or similarly with your co-sibling in Christ, you have heard my usual tongue-in-cheek response: “Think how boring it would be, if we were all the same, perfect like you and me”.

Irving Berlin must have been writing facetiously, too, when he penned “Sisters, Sisters”. Sisters can struggle with being “like-minded”, not prone to singing:

Two different faces, but in tight places

We think and we act as one

Those who've seen us

Know that not a thing could come between us. (Lyricsfreak.com)

Not like reality. We all have personal issues, struggles, problems in this life. I asked last week, how have you failed? How have you fallen? What has brought your spirit down?

Do you understand that we have all fallen, and “**can** get up”? What stories are we telling ourselves? We heard last week about what Dr. Brene’ Brown calls “the Reckoning”, which is: “seeing ourselves and our story as it is, not how we wish it was.” I asked you to remember what had or has taken you down.

We fall. We have fallen. We will fall. Or is it fail? Haved failed, will fail. Those two words are very hard to tell apart with 63 year old eyes. All have fallen short of the glory of God. Yes, we know it, especially about ourselves, but also we notice the fallings and failings of those around us. “We have to rumble with forgiveness. That includes self-forgiveness, too. Within families and in other close relationships, we love each other and we hurt each other.” (p 152).

RUMBLE

Brene’ Brown says it this way:

“The reckoning is how we walk into our story; the **rumble** is where we own it. The goal of the rumble is to get honest about the stories we’re making up about our struggles, to revisit, challenge, and reality-check these narratives as we dig into topics such as boundaries, shame, blame, resentment, heartbreak, generosity, and forgiveness.” (p.77)

Often the first draft, the initial story we tell ourselves in our struggle, is not well thought-out or even accurate. We assume things like: Oh, they must think ... I simply can’t ...They aren’t ... I have to ... often with a *hmmff* or a heavy sigh. Mary and Martha probably did a little of this, when at odds with each other. I’d like to have heard Martha’s internal dialogue. Dr. Brown writes:

“What we’re trying to do in the rumble - choosing to feel uncertain and vulnerable as we rumble with the truth - is a conscious choice. A brave, conscious choice.” (p. 79).

And suggests that we need to: “Get honest about the stories we’re making up about our struggle, then challenge these confabulations and assumptions to determine what’s true, what’s self-protection, and what needs to change if we want to lead more wholehearted lives.” (p. 37).

“How often we all try to solve problems by doing more of what’s not working - just doing it harder, grinding it out longer. We’ll do anything to avoid ... self-examination.” (p 179). And unfortunately: “You can do everything right. You can cheer yourself on, have all the

support you can find in place, and be 100 percent ready to go, and still fail.” (p 208). Life is like that, sometimes.

I read the Serenity prayer last week, the short form, and also 2 revised versions. I want to point out part of the longer version for us today.

God, grant me the Serenity
 To accept the things I cannot change...
 Courage to change the things I can,
 And Wisdom to know the difference.
*Living one day at a time,
 Enjoying one moment at a time,
 Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
**Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,
 Not as I would like it.**
 Trusting that He will make all things right,
 If I surrender to his will,
 That I may be reasonably happy in this world
 and supremely happy in the next.*

(Reinhold Neibuhr)

God designs us to be Martha *and* Mary. We are to be both, and be true to our calling. “There’s a time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:6-7). We need balance.

CONCLUSION

Good works, like Martha’s are meant to be the fruit of God’s loving grace in our lives ... “Jesus commends Mary and the life of contemplative prayer—because a loving relationship with God is the root from which all fruit ultimately grows”. (Franciscanmedia.org)

Life for the Christ-follower can’t be Mary **or** Martha. Our lives need to be Mary **and** Martha. Often we fail to get around to simply sitting at Jesus’ feet, speaking our hearts to God, and listening with love and gratitude. And it might be time for an internal rumble. Check in with yourself. Mary or Martha, or some of both? Thoughtful and active? Balanced?

It is easy to be *thoughtful* about current social issues, but that's one step away from the complacency of ignoring them. Brene' Brown reminds us: "Not paying attention to injustice because you're not the one getting harassed or fired or pulled over or underpaid is the definition of privilege" (p 166). Back to the Good Samaritan. Who's our neighbor?

It's time for us to rumble with seeking first God's reign, on earth as it is in heaven. We do that first with prayerful holy connection to Jesus, like Mary did. All the Martha work will still be waiting while we're doing that. Then we'll have the grace and guidance to serve well.

Grace and peace, devotion and forward motion. AMEN