

**Psalm 119:33-40, 97-105**

**Luke 10:38-42**

**July 24, 2016**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

***On the Road with Jesus***  
**AT THE HOME OF MARTHA AND MARY**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

A Google search of “Mary and Martha” turned up numerous websites with Bible studies, scripture translations, blogs, and commentaries.

A more specific Google search of “Mary and Martha Ministry” resulted in descriptions of many different ministries, most of them sponsored by Roman Catholic churches. Here’s a sampling:

The mission statement of the Mary and Martha Ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh states, “The mission of this lay apostolate is for contemporary women to grow in God’s love through sharing Recipes of Faith, to pray for the needs of the Church today and to welcome, to serve and to listen to the Lord — in the spirit of Martha and Mary of Bethany — through leading a sacramental life.”

At the Holy Cross Church of Rochester, NY, the Martha and Mary Ministry is “a ministry of caring for God’s people by offering families the possibility of gathering for a meal after the funeral of a loved one. Volunteers can provide a dish, pick up food trays from a local store, come early to set up, or come late to clean up.”

The Mary and Martha Knitting Ministry at the St. Xavier Church in Missoula, Montana is a prayer shawl ministry.

In Bismarck, North Dakota, Martha’s Ministry at St. Mary’s Parish provides baked goods for various parish events, including funerals.

The Martha Mary Guild “is a women’s spiritual, charitable, educational, and social organization of the Parish of St. Mary of Colts Neck, New Jersey.” They are women who serve, give, organize, lead, pray, welcome, and have fun” and “are dedicated to assisting women and children in need.”

The Winton Wyoming Pastoral Region provides the Martha Mary Ministry, “a scripture study of multi-generational women assisting one another to grow in faith.”

One of the more interesting finds was the Lutheran Church of Martha and Mary in Mt. Prospect, Illinois. Their website says, “At Martha and Mary you’ll find God’s love working through God’s people, a congregation that cares about its members, worship rooted in tradition and contemporary in expression, a little church with a BIG heart, a place for you.” The website asks “What’s in a name?” and answers, “Martha and Mary . . . kind of a strange name for a church, right? It comes from the Bible story in Luke 10. Jesus and the disciples visit the home of Martha and Mary, and these two sisters have very different reactions. One goes into action, preparing a welcome for Him. One sits at His feet, mesmerized. Here at Martha and Mary, we offer both types

of worship opportunities. We have plenty of Spirit-filled members sharing God's grace in outreach, like Martha. And we have plenty of opportunities for members to spend time learning more about who Jesus is and the relationship He wants with us, like Mary."

Most of the Martha and Mary ministries seemed to lean heavily toward serving and being active, but certainly with a prayerful foundation. The Lutheran Church of Martha and Mary appeals to two very different ways of responding to Jesus' call to discipleship — outreach and learning.

This story from Luke's gospel has traditionally been interpreted along those same lines. Martha is the busy, active believer. Mary is the quiet, contemplative believer. That is certainly how the sisters are portrayed in the story. Unfortunately, through the years Martha and Mary have been pictured as rivals at each other's throats. Service or contemplation? Which is best? At first glance the story seems to offer an either/or choice — either you're a busy, active follower of Jesus or you are a quiet, contemplative follower of Jesus.

Besides pitting one sister against another from a safe distance of 2000 years, there is a danger in hearing the story of Martha and Mary as an either/or choice for discipleship. To make things even more difficult, we hear the Lord himself say, "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." (Luke 10:42)

Do you feel sorry for Martha? After all, she worked hard to meet her culture's expectations of showing hospitality to her guests, while Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him (which, by the way, violated the social roles of women and puts Mary in the traditional place of a male disciple).

If you're a hard worker in the church, you might want to take up for Martha right about now. Maybe you even feel a little bit chastised by Jesus, along with Martha. Giuseppe Belli lived in Rome in the 19th century and was a papal civil servant. He was a faithful Roman Catholic and a man with politically conservative ideas. Nevertheless, he wrote more than 2000 satirical sonnets, many of them critical of church injustices and church ritualism.

Here's one of his sonnets titled "Martha and Magdalene."

*"But, Jesus Christ," said Martha, "I've had it to here  
with Mary Magdalene. I cannot take her  
rosaries, her novenas anymore.  
I open my mouth and she calls me a troublemaker.*

*I'm tied up day and night. I've never complained,  
but I'm getting tired — I'm always on my feet;  
you can't find this painted doll of a saint  
except, of course, when there's something to eat."*

*“Look, Martha,” the Savior said, “here’s where it’s at.  
You don’t deserve any explanation,  
but her job’s more important. It’s as simple as that.”*

*And Martha says, “So says you, but I know better.  
Listen, if I sat around on my salvation  
the way she does, who’d keep this house together?”*

So, which is it? The active life of faith or the contemplative life of faith? That’s actually a false choice that our gospel story doesn’t really offer, despite so many years of interpretations that pit Martha against Mary, believer against believer, even Jesus against Martha.

Jesus doesn’t say to Martha, “Martha, Martha, you shouldn’t be working so hard. It’s not right. It’s not a good thing that you’re busy with hospitality. Your sister is doing it the right way.” No, what Jesus says to Martha is, “Martha, Martha, you are **worried and distracted** by many things.” Martha’s anxiety about what she is doing distracts her from being in the presence of the Lord.

A word study of “worried” leads us to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, where he says, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:25-34) We also go to Philippians 4 and hear Paul say, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7)

Some of you may remember the movie *City Slickers* starring Billy Crystal. It tells the story of Mitch Robbins, a New York yuppie who is getting ready to turn 40. As a birthday gift, Mitch’s two buddies give him a two-week vacation on a cattle drive from New Mexico to Colorado for the three of them. They go on the cattle drive to search for some purpose in life.

In one scene, Mitch (Billy Crystal) is riding along with Curly (Jack Palance), the crusty, weather-beaten, stereotypical cowboy. Mitch looks at Curly and says, “Your life makes sense to you.” Curly says, “You city folk. You worry a lot. How old are you? 38?” Mitch replies, “39.” Curly tells him, “You all come up here about the same age. You spend fifty weeks getting knots in your rope and you think two weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it.” Curly pauses and then asks Mitch, “You know what the secret to life is?” Mitch says, “No, what?” Then the wise Curly holds up one finger and Mitch says, “Your finger? That’s the secret?” “No,” says Curly, “one thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and everything else don’t mean nothing.” Mitch ex-

citedly says, “That’s great, but what’s the one thing?” Curly stares Mitch in the eye for a minute, points at him and says, “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

Jesus tells Martha, “There is need of only one thing.” That begs the question, “That’s great, but what’s the one thing?” It’s as if Jesus says, “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.” If the “one thing” was simply leading the contemplative life of faith without doing anything, Jesus would hardly have told the parable of the Good Samaritan (which comes immediately before this story about Martha and Mary) which begins with the lawyer asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asks the lawyer what he reads in the law, and he answers with the right answer, “Love God and love your neighbor.” “Do this, and you will live,” Jesus tells him. In the same way, after he tells the parable about the Samaritan showing mercy to the beaten and robbed man, he tells the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25-37) Someone has said, if we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Good Samaritan or Mary, Jesus’ answer would be, “Yes!”

The story of Martha and Mary bores down into a deeper meaning than just an either/or life of action or quiet contemplation. The “one thing” is being in the presence of the Lord. In Bible study Wednesday morning, Tanya shared a question from the study notes/commentary in her Bible about this story: “Are you so busy doing things **for** Jesus that you aren’t spending any time **with** Jesus?” (emphasis added by me) That’s a good question, because as followers of Jesus Christ, we can and will find ourselves living in the tension between going and doing (like the Good Samaritan) and sitting and listening (like Mary). It’s not the going and doing OR the sitting and listening at issue — it’s what we hold onto as the one thing. that holds everything else together.

One day a scribe asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” There were more than ten commandments to choose from. In Jesus’ day, the religious leaders had developed 600+ laws and regulations about how to live a faithful life. Do you remember Jesus’ answer? “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31)

There “it” is — *e pluribus unum*, “from the many, one.” The most important, the “one thing” is centered in the Lord our God, who himself is one. But that “one thing” calls us to do something — love God, love neighbor. As one writer has put it, “If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment.” As individual Christians and as a church, we can consider the question, “Are you so busy doing things **for** Jesus that you aren’t spending any time **with** Jesus?” If so, we need to “seek first the Kingdom of God” and “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let our requests be made known to God.”

As Curly says, we’ve got to figure out that one thing.

***Let us pray: Eternal God, you draw near to us in Christ and make yourself our guest. In the midst of the cares of our daily lives, make us attentive to your voice and alert to your presence, that we may treasure your Word above all else. Amen.***