

## *The Main Course*

7th Sunday after Pentecost – July 18, 2004  
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Luke 10:38-42

<sup>38</sup>Now as they went on their way, he [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup>But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." <sup>41</sup>But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

*For this week and the next two, the Scripture passages will be drawn from the Lectionary (see the text box on pg. 2). Today, we will consider the brief yet challenging story of two sisters and their encounter with Jesus.*

Stephanie Frey tells the story of a woman in her church who never likes hearing this story preached because it makes her feel like she can't ever hope to get it right. If, like Martha, she works hard to make sure everyone gets fed, she'll get labeled as "over-functioning." If, like Mary, she sits and listens too long, nothing gets done!<sup>1</sup>

*Jesus visits some friends*

The story of these two sisters is from a lengthy portion of Luke that is sometimes called the "travel narrative" (Luke 9:51-19:44). Jesus has left Galilee (the region several days' walk north of Jerusalem) to begin the long walk toward his death. During this entire journey, Jesus is teaching his disciples, challenging the growing crowds, inviting all to follow him, and confronting the Jewish leadership.

After Jesus responds to a lawyer's testing with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus arrives at a home in Bethany, a small town two miles east of Jerusalem. It is the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus. We learn much more about Jesus' relationship with this family in John's Gospel. When Lazarus dies of an illness, Jesus comes to Bethany where he resuscitates Lazarus, bringing him back to life (John 11:1-44). On the eve of Palm Sunday, Mary anoints Jesus with perfume and wipes his feet with her hair (John 12:1-8).<sup>2</sup> This is a family that is deeply involved in and committed to Jesus and his ministry. We need to keep this in mind when we come to Luke's story. This

### Two Directions: Horizontal and Vertical

A few weeks ago, we looked at the story of Jesus feeding thousands with a few loaves and fish. We saw that Matthew skillfully placed this story immediately after the story of Herod's banquet and the execution of John the Baptist. By putting these stories side-by-side, Matthew drew a stark contrast between the rotten empire of Caesar and the life-giving empire of Christ; between Herod's banquet of death and Jesus' banquet of life.

Luke uses the same technique in today's passage. The story of Martha and Mary is immediately preceded by the parable of the Good Samaritan, one of the best-known of all Jesus' parables. It is a parable about our neighbors, about our relationships with others. In contrast, the story of Martha and Mary is focused on our relationship with the Word, with Christ. The parable of the Good Samaritan casts our gaze outward, horizontally. The story of Martha and Mary casts our gaze upward, vertically.

It would be a mistake to see a choice in this. Jesus isn't asking us to choose whether to love God *or* neighbor; we are to love God *and* neighbor. Consider the cross suspended over our altar; it expresses *both* the horizontal *and* the vertical dimensions of our faith. If we were to ask Jesus whether we should focus our energies on devotion to God or on service to others, his answer would probably be a simple "Yes."

<sup>1</sup>Stephanie Frey is pastor of a Lutheran church in Minnesota. This is from her reflections on Luke 10:38-42, "Living with Martha," in the July 13, 2004, issue of *Christian Century*.

<sup>2</sup>A common misconception is that the Mary who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume is Mary Magdalene; but it is not, it is the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

domestic confrontation happens in the context of an established friendship. So, knowing Martha and Mary, Jesus is probably not surprised at what happens.

### *The confrontation*

Martha has welcomed Jesus into their home. Despite there being work to do and a meal to prepare, Mary plops herself down at Jesus' feet.<sup>3</sup> This is pretty much how things are with Martha and Mary. On another occasion, when Jesus comes to Bethany after Lazarus' death, Martha would go out to greet him, while Mary stays in the house. Martha would prepare a meal, while Mary wipes Jesus feet with her hair.

Can't you picture Martha. For awhile she is probably ok with Mary sitting with Jesus rather than helping. But as time passes and Martha is left with everything, she begins to stew. She bangs the pots a little louder. Cabinets are closed with enthusiasm. Finally, she has had it and marches out to the living room - where she *tells* Jesus what he *must* do!! Whew.

### The Lectionary

The Revised Common Lectionary is a calendar of suggested Scripture readings for a three-year cycle. For each week, there are readings from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles (for this purpose considered to be the 23 NT books other than the four Gospels).

For example, the Lectionary readings for today, the 7th Sunday after Pentecost in 2004, are Psalm 52, Psalm 82, Amos 8:1-12, Colossians 1:15-28, and the passage we are using today, Luke 10:38-42.

The Revised Common Lectionary is used by more than 25 Protestant denominations in North America and is very similar to the Lectionary used by the Roman Catholic Church. The Lectionaries serve not only to provide Scripture passages for preaching, but also to provide congregations with a broad exposure to all of Scripture - including the parts that we find difficult or make us uncomfortable.

At St. Andrew, we are increasingly using thematic sermon series, such as the recent series on friendship and favorite children's stories. Still, the Lectionary is a valuable resource that can help us to hear the whole message of Scripture.

With great gentleness, Jesus criticizes Martha. He doesn't rebuke her for the work she is doing, but for her attitude toward Mary. Martha has forgotten that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deut 8:3; Luke 4:4). Mary has chosen to focus all her attentions on, as Peterson renders it in *The Message*, the "main course" - and Martha ought not criticize her for it. Still, it would be a mistake to be too hard on Martha or to elevate Mary. This is why we need to read this story alongside the story of the Samaritan (see the pg. 1 text box). There is a time to go and do (as Jesus tells the lawyer) and a time to listen and learn.

### *Our own distractions*

I suspect that most of us have little trouble identifying with Martha. There is so much to do. We are often overwhelmed by the frantic pace of our lives and the seemingly endless demands on our waking hours. Who has time to pray? Who has time to read the Bible? For many of us, it is probably easier to wade into our hectic schedules rather than adjust priorities or reconsider our choices.

Pastor Frey writes, "It is easier, for example, to make a casserole for a grieving family than it is to offer a word of hope in Christ, easier to welcome a new neighbor with a fresh loaf of bread than to invite her to worship. . . . Worship becomes a 'scheduling problem,' one that interferes with the 'one day we can sleep in'." That stings but how many of us haven't said to ourselves at one time or another, "I just need to take this Sunday off." Most of us probably run a much greater risk of having a Martha-problem (too much doing) than a Mary-problem (too much listening).

But as Frey goes on to say, "The good news is that Jesus the host has granted permission for all distracted, frantic people to sit down and eat their fill of word and promise. When we join them and nourish ourselves at the table, we'll be ready to put hands and feet, hearts and minds to work."

<sup>3</sup>This is a shocking image. In the Jewish world, women did not sit at the feet of rabbis (teachers) as disciples (learners), yet Jesus' teaching here is focused exclusively on women. Jesus doesn't just teach that all persons are welcome at God's table, he enacts it.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(The Samaritan, bread, and more on Martha and Mary's family)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Luke 10:25-37 Jesus tells a parable about a Samaritan.</b></p>	<p><b>Day 2 Luke 4:1-4 Neither Jesus nor we live by bread alone.</b></p>
<p><b>Day 3 John 11:1-16 The death of Lazarus (Martha and Mary's brother)</b></p>	<p><b>Day 4 Luke 11:17-44 Martha rebukes Jesus (v.21) but Jesus brings Lazarus back to life.</b></p>
<p><b>Day 5 John 12:1-8 Mary anoints Jesus on the evening before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.</b></p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Archived Sermon Background Studies

[www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org)

Today's Sermon Background Study is the 103<sup>rd</sup> that I've written. All of the studies are available on-line at the website of the St. Andrew Center for Christian Learning: [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org). The listings are organized by date/series and include the title of the study and the scripture passages. Thus, using the "Find" tool in your web-browser, you could, for example, look up all the studies that are based upon a passage from Luke or from Genesis. I post the studies on-line at least a week before the sermon. For example, the July 25 study is available now.

**The sixth "Fruit of the Spirit" evening lecture, *Gentleness*, will be this Tuesday, July 20, at 7pm in Piro Hall with Cecil Taylor.**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

I think that given the choice between Martha (the doer) and Mary (the listener), most of us would identify with Martha. We are busy people, prone to being over-busy, and perhaps even taking pride in it. We are people who know how to get things done. If no one else will do it, we will.

In and of itself, this is not a bad thing. There is much to be done. In the Bible, love is an action verb; love is more about doing than feeling. The Good Samaritan is "good" because he *does* something. Martha's mistake was not in making dinner, it was in losing sight of the vertical; she lost the balance in her life and got angry with her sister for spending time with Jesus!

How do we find this balance? How do we build a life and a faith that holds together our head, our heart, and our hands - the vertical and horizontal? It is tempting here to plunge into a list of tips, tricks, and techniques for trying to achieve this balance, but I wonder if Jesus is urging us toward something a little more radical.

Rather than trying to figure out how to make more time for prayer or worship or Bible study, what if we started from scratch. What if we began with God and then figured out how to make time for everything else. Rather than trying to make room for worship and Sunday School on the weekends, what if we took all that as a given and then figured out how we might best spend the rest of the weekend. Do you think this as radical as I think it is? What are the barriers to such a rearrangement of our priorities? Do our priorities reflect our true beliefs about what really matters in life? Where do we begin in finding balance in our lives?