

July 29, 2020

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

I can get pretty cranky about the uses of my name. A prime example of what makes me cranky is in Margaret Atwood's novel, or the recent television series based on it: *The Handmaids Tale*. In this story, "The Marthas" is a collective title for all women in that society assigned to the role of housekeepers. "Martha" is there used as equivalent to other titles, such as: "wife" or "handmaid" or "aunt," but somehow "Martha" is the only proper name used to denote a particular role.

And, in fairness to Margaret Atwood, that role fits perfectly well into the typical sermon one hears about today's feast: I'm sure you've heard it. Mary is the good student. Mary sat at the Lord's feet. Mary listened to what the Lord was saying. Here, the canonical often gets a bit of an update as we note how proto-feminist it is that Jesus is willing to teach *a woman*. Martha comes in complaining. And so we see that Mary is awesome and Martha's priorities are out of wack. Martha gets a scolding, Mary gets praised, we all go home happy believing we are Mary in this scenario. Which, by the way, is slightly harder to do when you walk around with my name.

Now, for all her bad rap, we know that Martha was a person of good intention. She welcomes Jesus into her home. She welcomes Jesus who, as we know from the John 11, loved her. John writes, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." So, Martha welcomes Jesus, her friend, and yet, Martha is anxious. So, with all the good intention in the world, an Anxious Martha directs her intensity to the wrong object: the fact that her sister is not helping. Now, all of us who have been in a similar position understand that it is infuriating, frustrating, exasperating to be working while everyone is ignoring you—and what you perceive to be the work of the moment—to do something else. Except, at least for me, in the times that I've been similarly frustrated, that "something else" that people are paying their attention to is rarely listening to Jesus. So, I'd like to validate that those frustrations are real, and that there is nothing laudable in unequal distribution of labor. But here's a twist: Martha isn't distracted by the dishes or the cooking, notice that the kitchen is not even mentioned in our reading for today! Our translation says she is distracted "by many tasks," but the Greek (Y'all knew that was going to happen eventually, didn't you?) reads "περὶ πολλῆν διακονίαν" or "concerning much service." Service! Note, that the word for service, *διακονία*, is where we derive "deacon" or "the diaconate." Martha is not distracted by trivialities, she is distracted by her own acts of service, by her ministry. And so Jesus calls to her.

Put in this light, we can see that Jesus is absolutely *not* scolding Martha. Jesus is teaching Martha. And the lesson is important. The evangelist chooses not to report what Jesus is saying to

Mary but instead, what he's saying to Martha. And note as well that Jesus doesn't speak to Martha in parables as he does to the crowds. He speaks to her directly, as he does to his friends, because she is his friend. Which of us would not seek to help our friend when they are distracted, anxious, worried, even when they are worried about important things: their ministry, their work, their loved ones?

Those things are important, but worry won't help any of them. What better act of love can there be in that moment than to see your anxiety, see your worry, and say, look! Here! There is ease available to you. There is time with your friend. I am your friend, and your service, your work, your ministry will be there when you return. Or as Jesus says elsewhere, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." This is time with friends. This is time for rest. Your ministry will be *strengthened* by rest! I am your friend, and I care about spending time with you.

Jesus teaches Martha; he doesn't scold. Yet, it can *feel* harsh, the way he says that Mary has chosen the better part, and that it shall not be taken from her. And, yes, Mary got there first. But we don't call it the parable of the good son who stayed at home and never caused a ruckus. We don't tell the story of the 99 sheep who stayed put didn't get lost. Jesus doesn't say that the healthy are in just as much need of a physician as anyone else. In this story, Mary is the stay-at-home son, Mary is the 99 sheep, Mary is healthy. And of course that should not be taken from her. As we say in our beautiful Compline collect: give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, [and] *shield the joyous*." But shielding Mary is not the lesson. The lesson for Martha is that: "there is need of only one thing." Just as James, John, and Simon Peter left everything behind to follow Jesus, Jesus says to another disciple, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Just as, Jesus says: "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink." Jesus is telling Martha, do not worry, follow me, your friend.

And in truth, I think most of us are not marys, and we need this lesson. We are worried about something. We *are* wondering how we will eat and clothe ourselves. Or maybe we are worried about how we will feed and clothe the poor! The things are important, but the worry need not be. There need of only one thing. And here again is the beauty of their friendship, their intimacy. He doesn't have to say any more. He knows that she already knows this. But her attention has wandered, and she needs reminding to refocus that attention, be with her friend, and rest.

So I am done thinking of this as a scene where Jesus is teaching Mary, and Martha gets in the way with her worries and concerns. This is a scene where Jesus turns his attention from Mary, as the shepherd from the 99 sheep, where Jesus shields Mary from the intensity of Martha's anxiety, and brings all his attention, and his passionate intensity to Martha. Jesus teaches Martha, his friend,

about the peace found in the love of God, shown to her by the love of her friend who says, it's okay, sit down, the only thing I want from you is you.

Amen.

Texts for July 29, 2020

Romans 12:9-13

Psalms 36:1-5

Luke 10:38-42



This work is licensed by Marta S. Rivera Monclova, PhD,
under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).