

The Better Part

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 16, 2016

Texts: Luke 10:38-42

The story of Mary and Martha is one I'm guessing is familiar to you. The domestic scene Luke portrays in this brief encounter is just so easy to envision, seeing immediately that this situation could happen to us. Two women, two sisters, have agreed to entertain a mutual friend for dinner, the supposition undoubtedly being that they would both be equally committed to the work such a meal would entail. Now that the planned evening is here, one sister, Martha, scurries around in the kitchen out of sight while the other sister, Mary, sits and chats with the dinner guest without a care in the world. Martha realizes what is going on and tries to make the best of it but she gets angrier and angrier the more it becomes obvious Mary has no intention of coming to help. Finally, Martha gets so furious she stomps out to the room where she sees Mary and their dinner guest – JESUS! – chatting away.

Now let me stop here a minute and ask, has this happened to any of the women here – where you agree with someone else (friend or relative, male or female, doesn't matter) to host some kind of luncheon or dinner only to have that someone else bail on most of the work? Is any of this sounding at all familiar? And what about you guys? Ever been in a situation where someone else has agreed to work with you on something only to have that

person dump all the work on you? It happens, right? Luke is telling *this story*, a story about something we've all experienced in one way or another at one time or another, inviting us to consider what it means. You won't be surprised there is no shortage of opinions on that!

The most traditional view of this story is that Jesus is chiding Martha – the busy sister – for paying attention to the wrong thing – whether or not her sister is helping her. Jesus, so this view goes, is teaching Martha – and all of us by extension – that Mary has made the right choice to put all of her focus and attention on Jesus while she could. This can only mean that Martha has made the wrong choice by fussing in the kitchen when she should have been listening to Jesus. Only problem with this interpretation of the story is – who was going to make dinner? Obviously the two sisters had their friend Jesus to dinner and it wasn't going to make itself. Here is where someone will point out that it was, after all, Martha who had invited him and therefore Martha should have expected to do all the work. She just got *jealous* of Mary and went whining to Jesus about her sister. Geesh...

Another way of looking at or interpreting this story is to see it as both women making valid, though vastly different, choices. Martha offered the invitation and was doing all the work because she was the “doer” of the two sisters. She was the woman of action, the woman who went after things. Mary, on the other

hand, was more the laid back, “well figure out something” kind of person who was much more interested in what Jesus was saying than what they’d eat for dinner. Martha, most likely having been in this predicament with her sister before, sees a chance to have Mary set straight by someone she respects so Martha asks Jesus to intervene. Jesus does, but not in the way Martha hoped.

Instead, Jesus points out to Martha that she is distracted by her worries about many things when there is need of only one thing for her to focus on. Then he tells her Mary has chosen “the better part” and that it (the better part) will not be taken away from her. Over the millennia this has been interpreted as Jesus scolding Martha for worrying more about the things of this world instead of salvation, heaven and eternal life where food won’t matter anyway. By implication, Mary was doing the right thing – making the right choice – by listening raptly to Jesus teach about salvation, heaven and eternal life.

Only one problem – the text does not have Jesus explaining what “the better part” actually is. Nor does Jesus chide Martha. He just states the obvious – she is worried and distracted about many things – preparing the food, cleaning up, etc., etc. Jesus is not telling Martha she’s wrong for what she chooses. He’s telling her she’s allowing herself to get worked up about stuff too much. Seen through this lens, Jesus is actually worried about Martha whom he sees as working too hard, doing too much without

thinking about herself. So, Jesus is not really saying one sister is right and the other sister is wrong. He's saying life is all about making choices *in the moment* and our choices define who we are. Jesus isn't choosing one sister as virtuous and the other as sinful, an interpretation all too common with this story. He's saying they are both being human, and that's okay.

We see this dichotomy – this difference – between the two sisters in another well-known Bible story, this one in the Gospel of John. This story is about Mary and Martha and another family member – their brother, Lazarus. Here the two sisters are once again portrayed as having very different temperaments. Martha, the proactive and practical sister, goes out to meet Jesus as he is traveling to them in Bethany after they sent word to him of Lazarus' illness. Mary once again the more passive and spiritual sister remains at home in mourning, surrounded by family and friends. After speaking with Jesus, Martha goes back home to get Mary and bring her to Jesus.

Interesting here is that both sisters say the same thing when encountering Jesus for the first time – “My brother would not have died if you had been here.” But Jesus responds totally differently to each sister. To Martha whom he encounters on the road, he uses this moment to explain to her, in the midst of a back and forth conversation, that all who believe in him will not die but have eternal life. Martha then affirms her belief in him as the

Messiah and goes home to find Mary. When Mary then encounters Jesus, she says to him again, “My brother would not have died if you had been here.” But this time, confronted by the weeping Mary and the weeping friends who had come with her, Jesus himself begins to lose control of his emotions. He begins to weep. Again, the two sisters encounter Jesus with vastly different outcomes. With Martha, Jesus uses their conversation as a teachable moment, encouraging and empowering her to name and claim her belief that he is the Messiah. With Mary, Jesus allows himself to be touched to the core of his humanity with her tears calling forth his own. He needed both sisters to encounter the full reality of the situation for himself and for the disciples following him and the crowds gathering at Bethany. He needed both Martha and Mary as who they were to make possible this pivotal moment in his life and ministry for it was this event of the raising of Lazarus that put him on the course that would ultimately lead to his crucifixion in Jerusalem.

Both sisters, just as they were, were important to and beloved by Jesus. He did not choose one or the other as more righteous or more correct or more what the perfect woman should be. He affirmed them both as beloved of God. They were not less than to Jesus because they were women. They were not objects of criticism or ridicule in either of these stories, much as some have tried to make them into such over the millennia. These were two

distinctive women, strong women, each in their own way – something Jesus recognized and validated as only he could.

Distinctive women. Strong women. Courageous women. Ordinary women. Mary and Martha were all of these and they remind us of all of these truths about women. Women are not automatons in need of male guidance and direction. Women are not objects of derision, easily ignored or overlooked just because they are female. Women, like Mary and Martha, like Mary Magdalene and Peter's mother, like the countless other women whose money and support made Jesus' ministry possible, mattered to Jesus. These women were valued by Jesus as equally beloved of God. These women were respected by Jesus because he knew it was their due. Jesus had no problem with strong, confident women. He did, however, have a big problem with sin and those who committed it willfully and arrogantly.

Willful, deliberate arrogance has been much in the news of late, an extremely unfortunate situation since it is directly connected with the Presidential election. Now, let's be honest, arrogance is always part of the Presidential election. It has to be. What other kind of person would think they could handle being the leader of the free world? You have to have some arrogance, a level of self-confidence that goes a little too far at times, to believe that you have what it takes to assume the Presidency and all it encompasses. That's why Presidential elections always involve a

rhetorical device known as “hyperbole.” Hyperbole is, simply put, speech which is greatly exaggerated. I can most easily explain this with an example. “I make a really good apple pie” is a normal statement which may or may not be true. “I make the best apple pie that mankind has ever or will ever eat” is hyperbole. I’m guessing by now you might have figured out where I’m heading here – into a brief reflection on the developments of this past week in the Presidential election campaign.

Normally this is territory where I would never go. And I will not speak at all to the candidates or their respective merits or lack thereof. I can’t. As a pastor, I cannot openly endorse one candidate or another and I won’t. However, as a pastor, I must address the issue of misogyny stripped bare by the rhetoric of this past week, some of which has gone way past hyperbole to be downright disrespectful of women. You’ve all heard the comments I’m referencing. “It’s just locker room talk,” is the most common excuse for what is really verbal abuse. And that’s only the mildest of responses to what has devolved into a hurtful and destructive diatribe attacking women generally. I don’t know the real truth of what happened with these women. None of us do, really. But I know that this kind of behavior of males toward females is simply unacceptable. It is disrespectful. It is sinful in every sense of that word. I also know that mysogyny – the mistreatment of women because they are women – is real because

it's happened to me. And it's happened to me all my life. It happened to me in college when I was reported to the Dean at the small Lutheran college I attended because by wearing a mini-skirt to Old Testament class I had been accused by a male student of tempting good Christian men to sin. The Dean dismissed it, but not before calling me into his office to let me know the charge had been made. I never wore anything but jeans to class, any class, again. It happened to me when I was first married and working in business when the CEO of our parent company hit on me, implying it could only help my career if I played along. I didn't. It happened to me right here in Westerly just a few years ago when some conservative colleagues dropped out of the clergy association telling me to my face that they were leaving because I was a member and women should never be ordained. They also called me an abomination because I believe God loves the LGBTQ community just as much as God loves me. This hateful, disrespectful and unwarranted treatment happened to me, dear friends, so I do believe it happened to those other women. I understand why they didn't come forward sooner –because they knew what would happen if they did – smearing, shaming and threats. And that is what happened and is happening still. That is misogyny and this election has stripped it bare for all to see.

But I know one more thing, and that's what Jesus taught me through his interactions with two of his closest friends, Mary

Martha. Jesus taught me, and Jesus teaches all of us, that women matter to him, that women are equally beloved of God. Jesus taught me the same lesson he taught to Martha and Mary – that there is a better part to life and that we are always called to recognize that choosing the better part is always just that – a choice. We make it for ourselves over and over again, every day of our lives in how we live those lives. The language we choose to talk with each other about the mundane things and the important ones matters. Treating everyone, women, men, old people young people, people different from us, even the people we most dislike, with respect and kindness – that’s a choice. Moving beyond ideology to practicality in decisions needed – that’s a choice. Never in my lifetime have our political choices mattered more.

That’s why I urge you to remember that the better part – the Jesus part – is never the simple choice, never the easy choice. In fact, it’s usually the opposite. And the better part, the Jesus part, often takes more effort to see and comprehend. That’s why Jesus had to explain to Martha that it was okay to sit and talk even when there was a lot to do. That’s why Jesus allowed himself to be touched by Mary’s tears over Lazarus’ death. Jesus knows life is all about choices and what you choose, each day including Election Day, is up to you. This Jesus stuff is hard and never has it mattered more. May God have mercy on us all. Amen.