

Women of the Church Study

Mary and Martha

Mary and Martha of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus, and friends of Jesus, are found in two accounts in the New Testament. These are briefly summarized below.

In the first account, in Luke 10:38-42, Jesus is welcomed into the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus listening to him, while Martha works at preparing a meal for the guests. Martha comes to Jesus and asks him to tell Mary to assist her. But Jesus suggests that Martha is anxious about many things and tells her that Mary has chosen the better part.

In the second account, in John 11:1-44 we find the story of Lazarus' illness and death and being raised from the dead. When Martha hears that Jesus is coming to the tomb of Lazarus, she goes to meet him, while Mary stays at the home. Martha expresses her strong faith in/to Jesus and tells him she believes he is the Messiah. Martha returns to the home and tells Mary that Jesus has arrived and asked for her. Mary goes to meet Jesus also. Consumed by grief for her brother's death, she weeps at Jesus' feet. Both sisters tell Jesus that if he had been present, their brother would not have died.

In each of these stories, the reader sees a contrast in the ways Mary and Martha respond to different situations. The first story is more commonly known and can give Martha a somewhat negative reputation, as she is focused on tasks, and not on Jesus. However, writers point out that Jesus does not criticize Martha for doing things, but for being "distracted," and "anxious". Kun writes "Jesus appreciated Martha's loving labor and recognized the generosity of her bustling nature, but he urged her to relax and enjoy his company. His reply was meant to help Martha recognize how senseless and unnecessary her anxieties were". Mary, on the other hand, shows her complete devotion and attention to Jesus and his teaching, "the better part". In the second story, Martha shows a different side. She again "confronts" Jesus and asks him to do something for her. Yet with this she shows her complete confidence and trust in Jesus and offers a bold confession of faith. In comparing Martha's faith to us today, Mathews writes "We cannot begin to grow until we see Jesus for who He is and come to him as we are". In this account, Mary shows another side as well; she is overwhelmed with her personal grief, she has difficulty fully expressing her faith the way her sister does.

Mitchell offers some insights: "What he (Jesus) wants for us is to be so keenly aware of his divine presence within us that whatever we do takes on the nature of the extraordinary and we live in a sense of wild gratitude". It seems we all do or can have aspects of both Mary and Martha, contemplation and action; we need to love God first, and can then love our neighbor.

Resources:

Biblical Women in Crisis: Portraits of Faith and Trust by Jeanne Kun

A Woman Jesus Can Teach by Alice Mathews

Who Does He Say you Are? By Colleen Mitchell

Reflections

--Recall last week's Gospel passages about Mary and Martha. Identify yourself with Martha (in each passage) for a moment.

-In what areas of my life am I distracted or preoccupied. Why? What might I do to find peace and freedom?

-What "complaints" about my life would I bring to Jesus right now? How would he respond to me? What help would I like Jesus to offer me?

(Both of the above from Kun)

-How strong is my testimony of faith in times of tragedy or loss?

Now identify with Mary for a moment (in each of the passages).

-How/when am I content to just be with Jesus? What contributes to my spiritual contentment, of discontentment?

-What can I do to remind myself that the Lord is always present with me and still my heart to hear his voice?

(Both of the above from Mitchell)

-When tragedy or grief overwhelms me, how do I experience Jesus?

--It is often suggested that we should find a balance between being a Martha and being a Mary. Kun writes "Indeed, in each of our lives, there's a time to listen, to pray, and to sit at Jesus' feet, and there's a time to act, to serve, and to wash the feet of those whom the Lord gives us. By balancing action and contemplation in a creative tension in our own lives, we make concrete our love for Jesus".

-Which sister do I identify with the most? Why?

-What steps could I take to gain a better balance between the priorities of Mary and the priorities of Martha in my life?

-How can this balance positively affect my Christian walk/discipleship?

(The above from Mathews)

Resources:

Biblical Women in Crisis: Portraits of Faith and Trust by Jeanne Kun

Who Does He Say you Are? By Colleen Mitchell

A Woman Jesus Can Teach by Alice Mathews

Devotionals/Prayers

--Although Mary and Martha display some unique differences in their temperaments, "the two are not opposed and they do not negate one another. ...Both of them together tell us...something precisely on the friendship, love and intimacy with which we should greet the Lord. In our house there is room for Martha and room for Mary and we must occupy both places. We must be Mary because we are welcoming the Word; and we must be Martha because we are receiving the Son of man, the Word who became Incarnate, precisely in order to share the human condition, and from within it to save humanity and the world..."

Above from: *Martha and Mary: Meeting Christ as Friend* by Cardinal Anastasio Ballestrero in

Biblical Women in Crisis by Jeanne Kun

--"Jesus longs for a world of women, of sisters, who will sit together at his feet and work together in his service, not looking to choose the better portion in order to be right or better or holier than one another, but to know Jesus more, love Jesus better, know Jesus more intimately, so that we can all...be content with who we are, how we are made, and what his unique calling is for our lives...He wants us to learn to accept the grace of being loved by him, so that we can be confident of what he can do for us".

Above from: *Who Does he Say You Are?* by Colleen Mitchell

--"To get our service right, we get our priorities right (as did Mary). We let Jesus minister to us before we go out to minister for him. When we keep our priorities in line with God's priorities, we find that God enable us to do what needs to be done with joy and satisfaction".

"In our times of loss we can recall the same words that Jesus spoke to Martha... "I am the resurrection and the life". After death (or any kind of loss) comes the resurrection. We can trust God's perfect timing. We can trust his love. We can come through our difficult experiences stronger in faith and hope as we learn God is there for us in our loss and sorrow. What we let Christ do in our situation makes the difference".

Above from: *A Woman Jesus Can Teach* Alice Mathews

--Lord Jesus, "Like Martha, I must prepare the house of my soul for your coming. I must warm it with love and light it with faith. I must weep away all vestiges of sin and prepare thee virtues you want to find. All this I should have done before your arrival. Forgive me if my soul is stained and disordered. But I must not turn from you now to engage in a too belated cleansing of my soul. So I beg you by a miracle of your grace you will make my soul not totally unworthy of your presence".

"May I too imitate the wonderful example of Mary. Quietly she sits at your feet. That I too can do. Wordlessly she listens to you. I am listening my Savior; speak to me. She has no time for other thoughts, no space in her mind for other memories. All other people must take second place to you, the beloved Visitor in whom is all she needs for complete happiness...let my thanksgiving be like the welcome Mary gave the Savior".

These two prayers taken from *Christ in Me* by Daniel A. Lord S.J.

Practical Application

There are so many lessons to be learned from the study of Mary and Martha. We can ask ourselves many questions about the two sisters and their unique attributes in life and the faith. Think about what you have personally gained from this study. Did it surprise you? Do you see anything you would like to do differently in your life as a result?

--Review the models Scripture offers us on Mary and Martha. Reflect upon which of the sisters you most closely identify with and then decide on a way you will try to be like the other! Then put this into practice. For example if you tend to be more contemplative like Mary, explore a new way to serve someone else. If you tend to be more of a “do-er” like Martha, try spending some extra time in prayer on a regular basis. If your faith tends to be strong and bold like Martha, explore how you might quietly use this to help another. If you become overwhelmed with emotion like Mary, explore how you might stand more firmly on God’s promises.

--Keeping the above in mind, reflect on the balance of Martha attributes and Mary attributes in your life. Identify the positives and strengths of each you possess and live by. Also look at areas where you could become stronger with either or both. Decide upon a plan to develop yourself in these areas to achieve a healthy balance. Put at least one of these into action in the week ahead.

--Look at your daily/weekly schedule. (Oh my!!) We all have obligations, responsibilities and “do lists”. Find a way to prioritize not only these tasks and activities, but to first spend time with Jesus and his word, listening to him, being inspired and strengthened by him. Let your activity be “rooted” in prayer. After consciously trying this for several days, do you notice a difference—has your work become lighter, do you feel calmer, or refreshed? Do things flow more smoothly? Any other differences?

--Now let go of being Martha or Mary. Practice being content with who you are. Focus on what really matters. No matter whether you are “doing” or “being” allow yourself to be mindful of your closeness or intimacy with Jesus. Hear him, trust him and depend on him. Keep a list of how you experience his presence in the midst of activity and during quiet devotional time or at any other times in your daily life.