

## **Mary & Martha (Luke 10:38-42)**

This story is simple enough. It is set in a traveling mode. "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way...." This was a stop on his itinerant teaching ministry.

Luke doesn't tell us the name of the village, since it's not important to his point. "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him."

Luke tells us simply, "Martha opened her home to him." Jesus' ministry had a person-to-person structure. His pattern was to find a person who would receive him, and then stay with that person while preaching in the village. If he didn't find a home open to him -- Jesus would go on. He didn't fund a block of hotel rooms for his crusade team in each town on the itinerary. Rather he taught and waited for an invitation.

Luke is clear to say that, "Martha received him into her house." It is spoken of as "her home. I take that to mean that she was the one in charge. As for Mary, Luke simply tells us that Martha, "...had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word."

While Martha is bustling about the house getting ready for dinner, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet listening. She was not sitting directly beside him – a place of honor – but at his feet, a place of humility – as a disciple or learner.

Hospitality is one of the oldest and most time-honored of all gifts, and Martha had the gift of hospitality. She opened her home to Jesus...she gave him a place to get away from the pressing crowds.

The picture of these two women is that of an older sister, quick to assume responsibility and do what needed to be done, and a younger sister who was comfortable deferring to others and letting them carry the load. Martha - pragmatic and concerned about the details. Mary – idealistic with her head in the clouds. Martha – a doer...she liked to stay busy, expressing herself by doing things for others. Mary, on the other hand – thoughtful, contemplative and expressed herself by her willingness to sit and listen and give another person her full and undivided attention.

They were so different from each other; yet, from every indication, Jesus loved them both the same. Jesus' love is more inclusive than we can ever imagine, that no matter how strange and different and out of synch we think we are – or we think our neighbor is – there's a place in God's family for every one of us.

Jesus encourages Mary to sit and listen. I imagine the scene with Jesus seated in a place of honor, perhaps in the house's courtyard, surrounded by eager listeners – his disciples, prominent members of the community and Mary.

"But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made." All of these guests, a great deal of cooking, setting the table where her guest will be seated. Dinner will be late unless she can get help. But where is Mary? Sitting outside with the men rather than inside doing the work that needs to get done. I can't understand why she thinks she can be out there when there's so much to do to get ready for dinner. I'm sure Martha wished to hear Jesus but was she had to provide hospitality for her guests.

Martha can't stand it, so she comes to Jesus and seems to interrupt the conversation he is having. She doesn't rebuke her sister in front of Jesus. She doesn't ask Mary to help her. Instead, she commands Jesus, "Tell her to help me!"

Immediately, Jesus seems to soothe Martha's anger..." 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things....' "

He identifies how she is feeling: "worried and upset about many things." Martha is feeling like she has more to do than she can do by herself. "...but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Mary has discerned that listening to Jesus is more important than anything else she might choose. The one thing Jesus wants above all else is our time with us listening to him, "sitting at his feet," as it were. That needs to come first, before all else. That is where peace is found.

The late author Anthony de Mello tells the story of a temple built on an island. The temple contained a thousand bells...

Bells big and small, fashioned by the finest craftsman in the world. When the wind blew or a storm raged, all the bells would peal out in a symphony that could send the heart of the hearer into rapture.

But over the centuries the island sank into the sea and, with it, the temple bells. An ancient legend said that the bells continued to peal out, ceaselessly, and could be heard by anyone who would listen. Inspired by this legend, a young man travelled thousands of miles, determined to hear those bells. He sat for days on the shore, facing the vanished island, and listened with all his might. But he was unable to hear the bells. He kept at his task for weeks. Each time he got disheartened he would listen to the villagers who spoke reverently of the mysterious legend. Then his heart would be aflame ... only to become discouraged when weeks of further effort yielded no results. Finally, he decided to give up the attempt. Perhaps he was not destined to hear the bells. Perhaps the legend was untrue. It was his final day, and he went to the shore to say goodbye to the sea and the sand and the wind and the coconut trees. He lay on the sand and, for the first time, really listened to the sound of the sea. It was the sound of silence. Soon he was so lost in that sound of silence that he was barely conscious of himself.

Then, in the depth of that silence, he heard it! The tinkle of a tiny bell, followed by another, and another, and another ... and soon every one of the thousand temple bells was pealing out in harmony, and his heart was rapt in joyous ecstasy...

I have always thought of myself as a 'Martha' instead of 'Mary' person, spending more time in hospitality than in a listening mode. I can (and do) sometimes become like Mary, but it is a little outside of my comfort zone (a childhood trauma is partly to blame for this). I always seem to have a need to be there for others in a hospitality mode.

This week, I will be attending the National Diaconate Conference...a time for me to decompress with some education, prayer time, socializing and listening with/to my deacon brothers. The best part of the day there is nighttime prayer just before bed. I work at putting the brakes on mental activities where my mind sometimes races forward at 100 miles per hour.

I say my prayers and talk quietly with Jesus for a short while asking no more than that I may become the person he would have me be. Then I just listen quietly...I want to hear the bells.

Do I always hit the mark? Not hardly. Most times, there are no bells, and sometimes there is just a gentle tinkling sound like that of a wind chime in the window. But that gentle sound is enough to quiet my mind and let me sleep.

I have yet to reach the point where I hear the thousand bells pealing out in harmony, but I will keep trying. Someday...it will happen. And so, I will keep listening to Jesus and listening for the bells.

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**Excerpts from Dr. Ralph F. Wilson & Dr. Philip W. McLarty**