

CHOOSING THE BETTER PART
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Poor Martha. Year after year, some preacher shakes a finger at her,
giving her a hard time for being in the kitchen making dinner
rather than sitting at Jesus' feet like Mary was doing.

As much as I dislike cooking and would like to justify myself with that approach,
that's just not the point of the story.

No, Martha was doing a lovely thing by serving Jesus like this.

In fact, the Greek word for serving at tables, διακονέω [diakoneō]
was brought almost unchanged into English as the word *deacon*.

Deacons are the epitome of loving service at the Table for God's sake.

Gracious hospitality is something the Bible consistently approves of!

Abraham makes sure those 3 travelers get some pretty awesome hospitality:
water to cool their dusty, tired feet; rest under a shade tree on a hot day;
and an absolutely huge, fancy feast – enough to feed dozens of people.

The amount of flour Abraham tells Sarah to use will make at least 24 loaves of bread –
some for the travelers to eat now, some to send with them, some for the family to keep at home.¹

A fatted calf (with all the fixings) is well over 100 pounds of meat² –

again, some to eat now, some to send with the guests, some for the family.

Time and again in the Gospels and epistles, generous hospitality is praised
and stingy hosts are criticized.

A common image for the Reign of God in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures
is that of a wedding banquet with tons of guests. Someone has to cook it all!

I hate to admit it, but God really likes a great party with wonderful food.

No, Martha's problem was NOT that she was making a nice meal for Jesus.

What was Martha's problem, then?

Martha had lost focus – not on WHAT she was doing, but on WHY she was doing it.

She was no longer serving out of love – for God, for neighbor,
or even for herself, for the sheer joy of cooking, which I've heard is a thing.

When we do something out of love, out of doing what is best for the other,
we love as God loves, and we actually labor in God's harvest, we heal and transform creation.

How do we know if we are doing the loving thing?

There's a test for that which is so simple a child can understand it:

Treat others the way you want to be treated.

But so often, that's not what we do. Instead, we want to WIN, to get the best of others,
to get one over on some rival, to win some cultural game.

When we live this way, we make the world a little colder, a little darker,
a little more hate-filled, until we actually become toxic for others.

That's Martha's problem: Losing her focus on loving service,
she got herself into a hissy fit that was all about her. What did she do?

What selfish people often do: she went and tried to ruin Mary's good time, too.

She goes over to the group in the living room and throws a stink bomb.

¹ <https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/genesis-181-15/>

² <http://familycow.proboards.com/thread/49462>

Her beef is with Mary, but who does she talk to? Jesus.

To get what she wanted, Martha blames and shames Mary to Jesus,
then tries drive a wedge between them by getting Jesus to side with her. Nice.

Jesus does a nice piece of family therapy here.

Since Martha wanted to make this all about her, he keeps it there:

The problem, Jesus tells Martha, is in her own attitude.

ONE thing is necessary. That one thing, always, is what? Love.

Mary chose to love Jesus by sitting and listening to him;
that choice of how to love would not be taken from her.

Not everyone is cut out to sit and listen to a teacher, however; some people love by serving.

Like the Good Samaritan we heard about last week, they love God by serving neighbor.

Even if it's difficult, messy work, they find purpose and joy in it.

Take our own Ronald Ellis, who just returned from the Dominican Republic
where he spent 7 buggy, muggy, unairconditioned days painting a school.

Ask him what kind of time he had, and he'll say, "Fantastic!"

But when our attitude gets all messed up, when it becomes all about us,

when we start doing things to win other's approval or to feel good about ourselves,

when our thoughts, words and actions are no longer grounded in love, we will become toxic for others.

Just so, Martha became toxic for Mary. They are sisters. They live together.

But when Martha has a problem, she doesn't care who she hurts.

She's willing to get what she wants by tearing her sister down.

So she pulls the oldest passive-aggressive tactic in the book:

She doesn't talk TO Mary, she talks ABOUT her. This is what's wrong with many relationships today.

We talk about each other, especially people we're in conflict with.

The conflict is escalated because when we talk about someone else
we rope a third person into our little game, we insist that they take sides.

Then we all start talking about those on the other side, tearing them down,
gathering more and more people to take our side.

Pretty soon we have an enormous conflict involving scads of folks,

but the problem can't be solved because the two people at the center aren't trying to resolve anything!

They are talking only to people that are on their side,

spending enormous amounts of energy convincing themselves

that they are right and the other side is full of worthless idiots.

When we start out with the premise that people on the other side are idiots,

we can end up hurting ourselves far worse than the other is hurt. A story about that:

One dark and stormy night, a man driving on a highway

saw a wave hit a bridge in front of him and wash it away. He stopped his car, of course.

Then he went out into the dark and pouring rain to warn others.

He waved frantically at an oncoming car,

but the driver thought the guy was just stranded and wanted help.

No time for that, of course! The driver and his family had places to go.

The driver called the guy an idiot and, with his whole family in the car

sped on down the highway, plunging everyone in his car to a watery grave.

When our premise is that we're the only ones who are right, that those not doing what we want is an idiot,
we not only harm ourselves, but everyone around us.

It happens in marriages, it happens in families, it happens in offices, it happens in churches,
it happens in government; indeed, we are watching this happen in real time in this great nation of ours.

Everyone seems to be doing it. But it is not the way of love.

If we aren't treating others the way we want to be treated,

it's not the way of love, and it's not the way of Jesus Christ.

Let's go back to Martha. I want to take Martha seriously; I want to take her problem seriously.
Like Abraham, she wants to treat her guests well. That's a good thing.

Like Abraham, she needs some help.

Abraham himself went to Sarah and asked for her help with the bread.

Abraham himself went to his servant to ask for help with the meat. Asking for help is 100% OK.

Abraham himself also did a bunch of work, and personally served the guests.

What if Martha quietly had gone up to Mary and said something like this:

I know you love listening to the rabbi, and I hate to ask you to do this,

but all the food is going to be ready very soon, and I just can't get it all plated AND set the table.

Could you please set the table for me?

But if you want to keep listening to Rabbi Yeshua, OK. I understand. Love you!

If she'd done this, Martha would have treated Mary like an adult

with the right to make decisions about how she wants to act.

Martha would have respected Mary's dignity, done what is best for Mary:

treated her the way she'd want Mary to treat her.

This is love in action, this is the ONE thing that is necessary.

If Martha had done that, Mary would have had a real choice: listen to Jesus or set the table,
and either choice would have been a choice for love: the One thing necessary.

What's more, by talking TO Mary instead of ABOUT her,

Martha would not have involved Jesus in a problem that wasn't his to begin with.

She wouldn't have created another conflict nor tried to force him to take sides.

Again, she would have done what was best for him,

she would have loved him, too, which is the ONE thing necessary.

As Cindy said last week, *What the world needs now is love, sweet love.*

And as I've said roughly 3 million times, love isn't something we feel, it's something we do,
and it's really hard, especially in our culture right now.

I'm not seeing a lot of love in the Twitterverse and the news,

industries entirely founded on people talking ABOUT each other. Just sayin'.

But I guess I'd better listen to my own sermon, so I won't talk about others!

I'll take a page from Mary's playbook and, instead, listen to Jesus, to Paul,
to the saints who chose the better part.

When we choose the better part, we live in Christ, and the Reign of God comes near to us.

When we choose the better part, Christ lives in us, Spirit renews the thinking in our minds
and we are clothed with the new person created according to GOD'S image.

When we choose the better part, we love as God loves

and actually make the Reign of God come near to others.

The "better part" that Mary chose, we can choose too.

We mustn't let ANYONE take that away from us.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

Eternal God, you draw near to us in Christ, and you make yourself our guest. Amid the cares of our lives, make us attentive to your presence, that we may treasure your word above all else, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

GENESIS 18:1–10A

The Lord appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he sat at the entrance of his tent in the day's heat. He looked up and suddenly saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from his tent entrance to greet them and bowed deeply. He said, "Sirs, if you would be so kind, don't just pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought so you may wash your feet and refresh yourselves under the tree. Let me offer you a little bread so you will feel stronger, and after that you may leave your servant and go on your way—since you have visited your servant."

They responded, "Fine. Do just as you have said."

So Abraham hurried to Sarah at his tent and said, "Hurry! Knead three seahs of the finest flour and make some baked goods!" Abraham ran to the cattle, took a healthy young calf, and gave it to a young servant, who prepared it quickly. Then Abraham took butter, milk, and the calf that had been prepared, put the food in front of them, and stood under the tree near them as they ate.

They said to him, "Where's your wife Sarah?"

And he said, "Right here in the tent."

Then one of the men said, "I will definitely return to you about this time next year. Then your wife Sarah will have a son!"

PSALM 63:1-8

O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;

my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.

Therefore I have gazed upon you in your holy place, that I might behold your power and your glory.

For your loving-kindness is better than life itself; my lips shall give you praise.

So will I bless you as long as I live and lift up my hands in your Name.

My soul is content, as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips,

When I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the night watches.

For you have been my helper, and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice.

My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast.

EPHESIANS 4:17–24

So I'm telling you this, and I insist on it in the Lord: you shouldn't live your life like the Gentiles anymore. They base their lives on pointless thinking, and they are in the dark in their reasoning. They are disconnected from God's life because of their ignorance and their closed hearts. They are people who lack all sense of right and wrong, and who have turned themselves over to doing whatever feels good and to practicing every sort of corruption along with greed.

But you didn't learn that sort of thing from Christ. Since you really listened to him and you were taught how the truth is in Jesus, change the former way of life that was part of the person you once were, corrupted by deceitful desires. Instead, renew the thinking in your mind by the Spirit and clothe yourself with the new person created according to God's image in justice and true holiness.

LUKE 10:38-42

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me."

The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

SERMON HYMN: *Blessed Jesus, at Thy Word*

BLESSING: Live without fear: your Creator has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you unconditionally. Go in peace to follow the Way of Jesus, and as you journey, the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you now and always.