

# To Do or To Ponder?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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1 Corinthians 12 (selected verses) Common English Bible <sup>4</sup> There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup> and there are different ministries and the same Lord; <sup>6</sup> and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup> A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good....

<sup>12</sup> Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many.... <sup>15</sup> If the foot says, “I’m not part of the body because I’m not a hand,” does that mean it’s not part of the body? <sup>16</sup> If the ear says, “I’m not part of the body because I’m not an eye,” does that mean it’s not part of the body? <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell?

<sup>18</sup> But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. <sup>19</sup> If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? <sup>20</sup> But as it is, there are many parts but one body. <sup>21</sup> So the eye can’t say to the hand, “I don’t need you,” or in turn, the head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you.”

<sup>24</sup> ...God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the part with less honor <sup>25</sup> so that there won’t be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. <sup>26</sup> If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it.

<sup>27</sup> You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

Luke 10:38-42 New International Version <sup>38</sup> As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.

<sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

<sup>41</sup> “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, <sup>42</sup> but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

A familiar story. Brief. Pithy. Martha comes off as a workaholic, maybe a little bit of a perfectionist. Mary? A dreamer. Contemplative. Hungry for insight, inspiration.

As Luke describes it, Jesus drops in for a visit with some friends, two adult sisters named Martha and Mary. Martha dives right into the tasks of being a hospitable host: offering beverages, preparing a meal, picking up the stray magazine, that sort of thing.

Meanwhile, her sister Mary has joined Jesus and his disciples, sitting at his feet to listen to the teacher speak about life and faith, purpose and worth. Eventually Martha notices that she’s alone in her tasks, and asks her friend Jesus to tell her sister to get with it and lend a hand. To Martha’s surprise, Jesus doesn’t send Mary off to the kitchen but commends her for her interest and focus and dedication. The message seems pretty obvious: “Martha, why can’t you be more like your sister Mary: devout... peaceful... *quiet?*”

Yes, that *seems* like the obvious message of the story. But here are two things we probably *don't* realize about this story:

- 1) This story is revolutionary in ways that are right out there in the open but we don't see them; and
- 2) In the story Jesus presents a powerful *unspoken* message.

Let's start with what could possibly be revolutionary about this simple story. Luke begins by writing that Martha welcomed Jesus and his disciples into her home. Yes, *her* home. Normally it would have been described as the home of the man of the house, so apparently there was no male head of household. Instead, it's known as the home of Martha and her adult sister Mary.

- Perhaps they had never been married? Unusual but not impossible.
- Maybe both were widowed and moved in together for mutual support? Could be.
- Perhaps at one time they had a brother living with them? Perhaps.

At any rate, it was unusual to encounter a home with women as the head of the household.

What made it doubly unusual was that a *man* (Jesus) chose to enter the home of a *woman* he wasn't related to—even if they were friends. In the culture of ancient Palestine the circles of activities of men and of women just didn't intersect—as a rule, men hung out with men, and women hung out with women. So neighbors may have been surprised when Jesus and his disciples came calling on his friends Martha and Mary.

What made it *triple* unusual was that a woman—Mary—took the customary position of a student to learn from Jesus as he offered words of wisdom and instruction. See, you need to know that in those days “Rabbis did not allow women to ‘sit at their feet,’ that is, to be disciples.”<sup>1</sup> But Jesus did not restrict himself to customary rabbinical practices. Indeed, as Luke reported two chapters earlier, as “Jesus traveled through the cities and villages, preaching and proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom...,” he and the twelve disciples were accompanied by others including women like “Mary Magdalene... Joanna..., Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.”<sup>2</sup> So while the neighbors may have raised their eyebrows as they peeked

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock. Interpretation—a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990, 152.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 8:1-3 Common English Bible

through the window and saw Mary sitting among the other disciples, we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus welcomed Mary among the group of inquirers.

Those are the reasons this simple story is revolutionary: it's a home headed by a woman or women; a man entered the home of women he wasn't related to; and a woman boldly inserted herself among the students of the teacher.

So what is the unspoken message Jesus gives in this brief story?

When Martha appealed to Jesus to tell her sister to get up off the floor and lend her a hand, Jesus acknowledged that Martha had a lot on her hands in that moment. But then he continued by telling Martha, "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Hmmm.

Did Jesus really mean to suggest that sitting in sweet communion at his feet is better than preparing the meal for which they had ostensibly gathered to eat? Is he saying the contemplative life is to be preferred over the active life? Perhaps what he means is that *for Mary*, this is "the better part." This shall not be taken away "*from her*" (emphasis added).

You have to wonder what Jesus would have said if it had been *Mary* who had been exasperated with her sister Martha. "Lord, why don't you ask my sister Martha to come join us and share in our beautiful conversation?" Perhaps Jesus would have said to Mary, "Martha has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." That is, Martha is not a contemplative. Martha must do what Martha is gifted to do. You must stay here with me. Martha should stay in the kitchen. You are not Martha, and Martha is not you.<sup>3</sup>

Lutheran pastor, theologian, and New York Times best-selling author Nadia Bolz-Weber has suggested that

...maybe choosing the better part isn't about choosing between action and contemplation, maybe it isn't about working or sitting at Jesus' feet, since the Christian life has always been a combination of the two. Maybe choosing the better part is not judging the actions of others through the lens of your own personality.<sup>4</sup>

In this story of Martha and Mary we hear echoes of St. Paul's twelfth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians. You'll recall that there he wrote,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/93041368> accessed 7/11/2022

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2013/08/sermon-on-mary-and-martha/> accessed 7/13/2022

<sup>4</sup>There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. <sup>5</sup>There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. <sup>6</sup>There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. <sup>7</sup>Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.<sup>5</sup>

Later in that passage Paul used the metaphor of the community of the church as a body. Paul pointed out that God gives each of us different gifts and skills and talents and passions because of how our unique selves can collaborate to accomplish a common good. By making use of a body's ears, and eyes, and nose, and hands and feet, and so on, working together a body can function in ways that no single part could do on its own.

In this story of Martha and Mary, while Jesus responded to Martha's question by affirming Mary's choice, Jesus wasn't excluding Martha's choice. Neither should we.

"If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment."<sup>6</sup>

With a pastoral leadership change on the horizon, this congregation is preparing to enter a new chapter in its journey as a community of believers. Any time of successful transition from what *was* to what *will be* will depend on the people's generosity in sharing their talent and energy, in sharing their wisdom and insight. This church will have times when we need to "go and do," and there will be times when what's needed is to listen to one another and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and reflect on what God is saying to the church for this new chapter.

Just as Martha needed Mary and Mary needed Martha, this church needs each of you in order to bring together the richness of God's gifts for the sake of the church's ministry and mission outreach. One gift or skill or talent or viewpoint is not more important than another. As New Testament professor and preacher Fred Craddock has commented, if we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us — should we choose the path of service like Martha did or the path of contemplation as Mary chose — if we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, Jesus' answer would probably be Yes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 New International Version

<sup>6</sup> Fred B. Craddock. Interpretation—a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990, 152.

<sup>7</sup> Fred B. Craddock. Interpretation—a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990, 152.