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Title: *Life Beyond the Text*

Text: Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

- Luke 10:38-42

One of my mantras in my ministry (as many of you know) is: "healing takes place in the life of community." When our family first moved to Greenville almost 2 years ago, the Delta Democrat Times did an article on me and quoted that sentence and put it in bold print as a caption for the whole article: "I believe that healing takes place in the community." I was not aware that that was a theme in my ministry, an important component to my theological beliefs until I read that article; the DDT helped bring that to my awareness. Fleshing that out more, what that statement means is: I believe we do not grow spiritually on our own, but we rely on God and one another to facilitate a healthy spiritual life. This is one reason why the church is so important... central... to our life of faith. We do not practice our faith in isolation; we practice our faith in relationship with each other... corporately... in the church.

In short, that is what I believe our Gospel text is about: healing in the life of community... a small community... consisting of Martha, Mary & Jesus. We

do not see the healing take place in this text. But, when we imagine the life beyond the text, we see how this encounter with Christ became an agent of healing for Martha and Mary.

In the scripture lesson, we are given a very brief snapshot... a brief interaction... that involves conflict.

Jesus does not ignore the conflict. He believes that conflict should be handled head-on and directly. He believes every effort must be made to resolve conflict for our health and peace.

Jesus enters a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomes him and makes him feel quite at home. She has a sister, Mary, who is sitting before the Master, hanging on every word he says. But Martha is pulled away by all she has to do in the kitchen. (Then), she steps in, interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand."

The Master says, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's very important and will not be taken from her. (Luke 10:38-42, Paraphrase of *The Message*)

Notice: Jesus does not ignore the conflict between Martha and Mary. In fact, Jesus even joins the argument! Sometimes a good argument is needed in life to move through something difficult... (and yet, one must be careful that arguments do not become a regular pattern in relating to others.)

Martha and Mary. These are two good people. It's clear, however, that it's Martha who is vulnerable. She is the one who Jesus reprimands. "Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things," Jesus says.

Now some readers of this text are tempted to put down (denigrate) Martha. I have heard some interpret the text to say: "Martha is doing mindless chores while Mary is doing the good and right thing to do: sitting at the Jesus' feet and listening to his word."

I do not share this perspective.

Again, we are given a very brief snapshot... encounter... between Martha, Mary and Jesus. I believe that if we were to continue to experience life...

beyond this text... we would not need to wait very long before Mary got in a bit of trouble with Jesus, too! I think we would see that Martha and Mary learn that the other person has something that they don't have, and so they learn from each other... and from Jesus... how do be faithful followers of Christ.

In fact, I can empathize with both Martha and Mary. Yet, I will admit: when I read this text, (personally) I find myself wanting to defend Martha.

I admire Martha in some ways in this text. After all, she had the guts to go up to Jesus and say what was on her mind! Sometimes I think a bigger problem comes from stuffing your emotions... and holding everything in. Maybe after Martha spoke, she said to herself: "I wish I just kept my mouth shut, then I wouldn't have gotten into any trouble!" But, the truth is, if she hadn't spoken her mind, she would have missed an opportunity to learn something from Jesus. She would have kept working in the kitchen filled with anger and resentment toward Mary.

Yet, we also see in the text that Martha was distracted. The Greek word for "distracted" means "to be pulled, dragged away." Why? Why was Martha distracted? The implication is that Martha has become distracted and overburdened by the pressure of providing hospitality. Maybe Martha was distracted because she wanted to listen to Jesus' teachings, but knew how difficult it would be to do that if everyone had an empty stomach! Margaret Guenther in her book *Holy Listening* says: "When it comes to the spiritual gift of hospitality, it takes a lot of work to make it look effortless. To make a neat, orderly space in one's home, to prepare and serve food, all of this adds to an already busy life."

On the other hand, Martha is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him speak. Jesus affirms her behavior. "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" Jesus says. For this reason, it becomes easy to elevate Mary over Martha.

Rev. Barbara McKenzie writes: "What if this story is not about elevating one over the other? What if it is about Jesus saying to Martha: 'You have become burdened by the elaborate nature of the meal you are preparing for me?! An elaborate meal is not as important as listening to me. Prepare a simpler meal so that you have time also to listen to my teachings.'"¹

¹ Barbara McKenzie. *Clearing Away the Psychic Clutter. Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42.*

I myself can't help but ask: "Why didn't everyone just move into the kitchen together, so they could all cook and talk together at the same time?" It seems to me that would be a simple solution that would promote healthy community... and everyone's needs would be met. Why not create an open floor plan in the house... and knock out the wall between the kitchen and living room – just like they do on HGTV – and make the kitchen and living room all one room? Sometimes we need to create spaces... to promote healthy community in our homes... churches... and public spaces.)

And yet, it's always easy to see what could have happened in hindsight, isn't it?

Have you ever had that experience where something unfortunate happened... and then minutes... maybe hours later... you realize: "Gosh, if I just made this subtle change, I could have avoided all this grief and misunderstanding?" Sure! We have all experienced that!

What this text reveals is: Mary and Martha have different priorities. That is clear! For Mary, her priority is study. For Martha, it is service. It is just like the church. There are some who think that Christian Education is the most important thing we do, then there are some who say mission. And the truth is, we need both of them! We would not be doing proper Christian ministry without each of them working together to do God's work!

I am grateful for the Marys and the Marthas in this world! Both have so much to teach us!

The Marys teach us about study... reflection; they are adventurous, renegades at times, but they seek after God.

The Marthas teach us about responsibility, hard work, service and hospitality.

We need them both!

In reading the story, most people identify more strongly with either Mary or Martha. (Both Women and Men)

Perhaps every person has both a Mary side and a Martha side?

Perhaps each of us has one side that is more familiar and more often lived out, but perhaps there is the other side waiting for recognition and living out?

“Doers” like Martha might allow their contemplative nature to come forth?

“Contemplatives” like Mary might allow their Doer side to come forth?

Some people need to hear this message: “Don’t just stand there, do something!

Perhaps others who are always active and take no time for thought and prayer need to hear this message: “Don’t just do something, stop and wait and think about it before you act.”

So, let me ask each of you: Are you a Mary or a Martha? What is the other side of you waiting for recognition... and living out?

I heard recently that there was a women’s bible study and the scripture for the day was this very text. They explored the conflict between Mary and Martha... and everyone fell right into their roles. In the Bible study, some were Marys and some were Marthas; the Marys in the room were irritated with Martha.... and the Marthas in the room were irritated with Mary. The tension in the text soon became the tension in the bible study.

Right there is where God speaks to us. Right there is where healing occurs. If we are reading the scriptures faithfully, scripture will certainly bring up difficult feelings and things you are trying to reconcile.

When a moment of tension or conflict comes to the surface, we must be careful not to ignore it or fail to deal with it in the life of community. Like Martha and Mary, we must include Jesus in our moments of dis-ease and conflict. When we do this, we will most certainly be moved along the path of healing and peace.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon owes much to Clifford J. Hayes and John B. Butcher.