

# “Relationship”

Luke 10:38-42

## ***What is the true value of a relationship?***

Certainly, the most-well known story about these two sisters, Martha and Mary, is the brief account in Luke of Jesus’ visit to their home. Martha, the busy one; Mary, the one sitting at Jesus’ feet. The story paints Mary as the one focused on her relationship with

Jesus. But, perhaps, looking at one story doesn’t really show us the whole story. Relationships take time and work and, sometimes, courage. Here is the larger story of Martha and Mary.

### ***Martha and Mary at home with Jesus***

The story of Mary and Martha at home with Jesus is one of those stories that feed my imagination. I can picture them in their home, Martha busy in the...*one minute, I’ll be right back...sorry, about that, but I really had to get that call...now, where was I...* I can picture them in their home, Martha busy in the kitchen, Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet while Martha starts to...*oops, I better get that too, someone is texting me and they surely need me right now, besides, I can text while I write this study...what? Why don’t I just turn off the darn phone? Are you kidding, I’m way too needed to be out of touch. What would they do if they can’t reach me? Get real...*

What have we done to ourselves? We seem to be busying ourselves to death. We overschedule, over-commit, and over-available ourselves. I really doubt that there are many of us who escape this, who really do turn-off and tune-out. Really, who has time for relationships?

Stephanie Frey tells the story of a woman in her church who never likes hearing this story preached because it makes her feel like she can’t ever hope to get it right. If, like Martha, she works hard to make sure everyone gets fed, she’ll get labeled as “overfunctioning.” If, like Mary, she sits and listens too long, nothing gets done!<sup>1</sup>

### ***Jesus visits some friends***

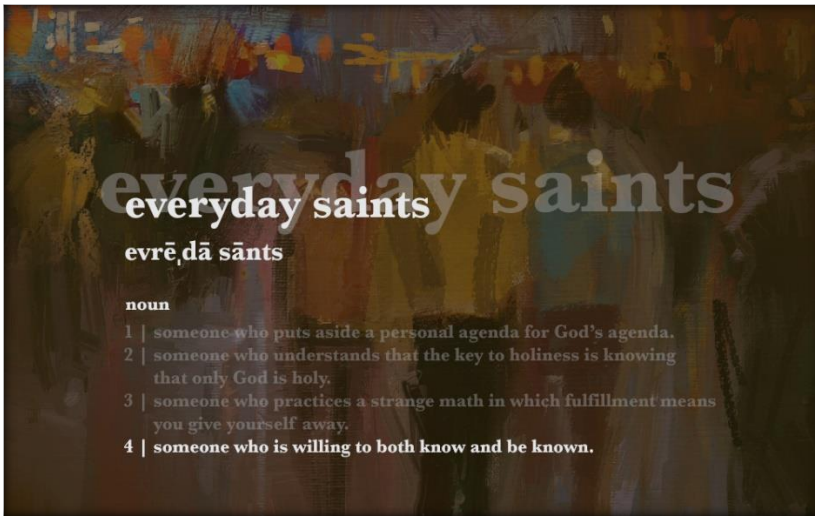
The story of these two sisters is from a lengthy portion of Luke that is sometimes called the “travel narrative” (Luke 9:51-19:44). Jesus has left Galilee (the region several days’ walk north of Jerusalem) to begin the long walk toward his death. During this entire journey, Jesus is teaching his disciples, challenging the growing crowds, inviting all to follow him, and confronting the Jewish leadership.

After Jesus responds to a lawyer’s testing with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus arrives at a home in Bethany, a small town two miles east of Jerusalem. It is the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus. We learn much more about Jesus’ relationship with this family in John’s Gospel. When Lazarus dies of an illness, Jesus comes to Bethany where he resuscitates Lazarus, bringing him back to life (John 11:1-44). On the eve of Palm Sunday, Mary anoints Jesus with perfume and wipes his feet with her hair (John 12:1-8).<sup>2</sup> This is a family that is deeply involved in and committed to Jesus and his ministry. We need to keep this in mind when we come to Luke’s story. This domestic confrontation happens in the context of an established friendship. So, knowing Martha and Mary, Jesus is probably not surprised at what happens.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Frey is pastor of a Lutheran church in Minnesota. This is from her reflections on Luke 10:38-42, “Living with Martha,” in the July 13, 2004, issue of *Christian Century*.

<sup>2</sup> A common misconception is that the Mary who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume is Mary Magdalene; but it is not, it is the sister of Martha and Lazarus



## Horizontal and Vertical

Luke, like all the gospel writers, uses literary and rhetorical techniques to create a compelling proclamation of the Good News. Juxtaposing contrasting stories is one such technique.

For example, Matthew skillfully places the story of Jesus feeding the multitude immediately after the story of Herod's banquet and the execution of John the Baptist. By putting these stories side-by-side, Matthew draws a stark contrast between the rotten empire of Caesar and the life-giving empire of Christ; between Herod's banquet of death and Jesus' banquet of life. Luke uses the same technique in today's passage. The story of Martha and Mary is immediately preceded by the parable of the Good Samaritan, one of the best-known of all Jesus' parables. It is a parable about our neighbors, about our relationships with others. In contrast, the story of Martha and Mary is focused on our relationship with the Word, with Christ. The parable of the Good Samaritan casts our gaze outward, horizontally. The story of Martha and Mary casts our gaze upward, vertically. It would be a mistake to see a choice in this. Jesus is not asking us to choose whether to love God *or* neighbor; we are to love God *and* neighbor. Consider the cross suspended over our the Communion Table in our sanctuary; it expresses both the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of our faith. If we were to ask Jesus whether we should focus our energies on devotion to God or on service to others, his answer would probably be a simple "Yes."

### ***The confrontation***

Martha has welcomed Jesus into their home. Yet despite there being work to do and a meal to prepare, Mary plops herself down at Jesus' feet.<sup>3</sup> Can't you picture Martha. For awhile she is probably ok with Mary sitting with Jesus rather than helping. But as time passes and Martha is left with everything, she begins to stew. She bangs the pots a little louder. Cabinets are closed with enthusiasm. Finally, she has had it and marches out to the living room – where she *tells* Jesus what he *must* do!! Whew.

With great gentleness, Jesus criticizes Martha. He doesn't rebuke her for the work she is doing, but for her attitude toward Mary. Martha has forgotten that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deut 8:3; Luke 4:4). Mary has chosen to focus all her attentions on, as Peterson renders it in *The Message*, the "main course" – and Martha ought not criticize her for it. Still, it would be a mistake to be too hard on Martha or to elevate Mary. This is why we need to read this story alongside the story of the Samaritan (see the adjacent text box). There is a time to go and do (as Jesus tells the lawyer) and a time to listen and learn.

### ***Who has time for the main course!***

I suspect that most of us have little trouble identifying with Martha. There is so much to do. We are often overwhelmed by the frantic pace of our lives and the seemingly endless demands on our waking hours. Who has time to pray? Who has time to read the Bible? For many of us, it is probably easier to wade into our hectic schedules rather than adjust priorities or reconsider our choices.

Pastor Frey writes, "It is easier, for example, to make a casserole for a grieving family than it is to offer a word of hope in Christ, easier to welcome a new neighbor with a fresh loaf of bread than to invite her to worship...Worship becomes a 'scheduling problem,' one that interferes with the 'one day we can sleep in'." That stings but how many of us haven't said to ourselves at one time or another, "I just need to take this Sunday off." Most of us probably run a much greater risk of having a Martha-problem (too much doing) than a Mary-problem (too much listening).

But as Frey goes on to say, "The good news is that Jesus the host has granted permission for all distracted, frantic people to sit down and eat their fill of word and promise. When we join them and nourish ourselves at the table, we'll be ready to put hands and feet, hearts and minds to work."

I think that given the choice between Martha (the doer) and Mary (the listener) in this story, most of us would identify with Martha.

<sup>3</sup> This is a shocking image. In the Jewish world, women did not sit at the feet of rabbis (teachers) as disciples (learners), yet Jesus' teaching here is focused exclusively on women. Jesus does not just teach that all persons are welcome at God's table, he enacts it.

We are busy people, prone to being overbusy, and perhaps even taking pride in it. We are people who know how to get things done. If no one else will do it, we will.

In and of itself, this is not a bad thing. There is much to be done. In the Bible, love is an action verb; love is more about doing than feeling. The Good Samaritan is “good” because he *does* something. Martha’s mistake was not in making dinner, it was in losing sight of the vertical in the moment; she lost the balance in her life and got angry with her sister for spending time with Jesus!

But is there more to the story? Jesus makes another visit to their home; this time, under very difficult circumstances.

### **Another visit**

Jesus and his disciples have gone to the eastern side of the Jordan River, to an area known as Batanea<sup>4</sup> (John 10:40-42). It is about four days from the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, in Bethany, a town very near Jerusalem. The family is very close with Jesus and he loved them.

Jesus receives a message from the sisters that Lazarus has fallen seriously ill. When Jesus gets the message, he says to those around him that Lazarus will not die. This event too, will work for the glorification of God and God’s son.

Jesus does not yet leave for Bethany and a couple of days later he learns, by seemingly supernatural insight, that Lazarus has died. But Jesus tells his disciples that they can set out for Bethany so that Jesus can wake Lazarus up. It will be a journey of several days.<sup>5</sup>

When they arrive, Jesus is met by Martha, who expresses her regret that Jesus had not been there when her brother had died, for she believes that Jesus would have cured him and, even now, she places her hope in Jesus and the unique relationship he has with the Father. This is a surprising moment. It is Martha who is confident enough in her relationship with Jesus to be honest about her feelings, even to rebuke him, however mildly.

It is Martha who goes on to pronounce Jesus, “the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world’ (John 11:27). After all, Mary is nowhere to be found; she will not come to Jesus until he calls for her (v. 28).

So, perhaps we can see that in her “doing,” Martha too is building a relationship with Jesus. Serving others does that – it builds relationships that endure and give us the courage to say the hard, but necessary, things. As close as Jesus was to the family, we can be sure that there were many more opportunities for true love to flourish among these four close friends.

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<sup>4</sup> Recent research suggests that the “Bethany” of John 1:28 and alluded to in 10:40-42 is not the “Bethany” located less than two miles from Jerusalem. Place names and especially their spellings were much more fluid in the ancient world than in our own. For more on this see D. A. Carson’s commentary on John in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series.

<sup>5</sup> The four days is important. We know, from a rabbinical commentary called *Leviticus Rabbah*, that by a slightly later date, there was a rabbinic belief that after a person seemed dead to all observers, the soul hovered around for three days, waiting to depart until decomposition began. At that point, death was certain. If this was a belief held by any Jews in Jesus’ day or even amongst John’s readers, the four days makes it clear that Lazarus is dead, dead, and dead! For more on this, see Carson’s commentary. Given the difficulties of ascertaining genuine death in the ancient world, this is not as crazy a way to think about it as it might seem.