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Last week the prophet Amos reminded us of our responsibility to uphold the two pillars of God's teaching—love of God and love of neighbor—and warned us of what happens to society when we don't.

Today Amos sharpens his critique against systemic practices that ignore God's teaching, turn a blind eye to justice, and take advantage of the dispossessed.

Without losing sight of the importance of what Amos has to say—especially as it applies to what we see unfolding in our country before our very eyes—I want to focus our attention today primarily on our GOSPEL story.

In her book, The Women Around Jesus, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendell, speaks of the importance of using our imaginations as we approach the Bible.

> "Imagination," she writes, "is the power of the Holy Spirit to bring new life to whatever has become fossilized."[1]

And "fossilized" is an apt description of how the five short verses before us have come to be treated.

There's so much here in this encounter between Jesus, Martha, and Mary—yet centuries of limited and limiting interpretations have turned the story into a cliché. *"Her? Oh, she's a Martha…Oh, she's a Mary."*

Like other encounters with Jesus in the Gospels, we often assume we got it figured out; that we know exactly what's going on in the text.

And so there may not be much room for considering alternative ways of looking at the story; especially a story whose dynamics and characters we're convinced we already know so well!

The plotlines of this story have become well-worn grooves in our minds—
Martha the doer, Mary the listener;
Martha the anxious hostess, Mary who leaves her sister to sit at Jesus' feet.

In recent decades feminist interpreters have opened the door to new possibilities for understanding what this text is about. (Hold on now, for a deeper dive…)

For example, in their Wisdom Commentary Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews approach the story with wariness because of the way it polarizes the two sisters so that, in the end, one seems to come out "right" and the other "wrong."

[1] Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendell, *The Women Around Jesus*.

Their interpretation of Luke, in general, is quite critical of the gospel writer for what they see as his tendency to cast women in more passive roles.

Excavating the Greek Luke uses to tell today's story, Reid and Matthews focus on two words in particular: DIACONIA and PERISPAO.

The noun *diakonia* is used 32 times in the New Testament and variously translated as "ministry," "service," "relief," or "support." It's the word from which our word DEACON is derived.

The question is, how should we interpret "diaconia" in today's story?

- **Does diaconia refer to the "service" duties of Martha?**
- **Or does it refer to her work as a minister within the disciple community?**

Reading DIACONIA one way may lead us to believe Martha simply has too many hostess duties on her plate when Jesus comes for dinner. That's the conventional approach.

But reading DIACONIA another way may suggest that the real issue is that Martha is being overburdened by her duties as a ministry leader in the disciple community.

Do you hear the difference?

Likewise, the verb PERISPAO can have more than one meaning.
It can mean being "worried" or "distracted," which is how it's translated in the NRSV, or it can mean "being pulled or dragged away."

If we go with the latter translation, then Martha's appeal to Jesus sounds much less like whining about hostess duties and much more about how she's being pulled away from the diaconal ministry duties to which she's been called.[2]

Going a step further, scholar Jane Terlesky suggests that when Jesus uses the double vocative—MARTHA, MARTHA—which can come across as a kind of TSK, TSK chiding, rather than being dismissive of her concerns Jesus is instead letting her know he's fully present and fully focused on what she has to say.

> "Mary and the others…can wait," writes Terlesky, as "Jesus [tells] Martha, 'I hear you, I see you, I'm with you.'" Martha is indeed overburdened. But the problem isn't her anxiety [but rather the] fact that she feels so alone.[3]

[2] Ibid.
[3] Terlesky, Jane (2018) *There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe: Was it Martha?,* Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 8. Available at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol1/iss2/8

> Perhaps, says Terlesky, "Martha's state of distress [is] the consequence of a system that traditionally has not heard women…and in not hearing, has not helped."[4]
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> "Whether we are privileged women who work for pay, privileged women who do not work for pay, or especially, severely underprivileged women who are trying to scrape together a meal for their families… that part of us that is expected in a patriarchal system to perform what it labels 'menial' tasks, will call out, begging to be heard. And it will call out to re-define what is valuable.
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> "The call [in this story]," Terlesky concludes, 'is for a balanced world in which the community—not just Martha alone—needs to make an adjustment. It does not help us to 'blame' Martha entirely for her anxiety, just as it does not help us to blame any marginalized group entirely for the problems [they] face…[in] a system that marginalizes [them]."[5]

The work of scholars like Terlesky, Reid, and Matthews open up new possibilities for understanding stories that have become in many ways "fossilized." And for this we can be grateful.

Both Amos and Luke remind us that the SYSTEMS of which we are part in human community are a real THING—and always have been.

The thing about these SYSTEMS is that they're so omni-present, so pervasive, that we don't even notice them until someone—often an outsider—points them out to us and we begin seeing what we'd taken for granted in a new way.

That, indeed, is how AMOS functions.

He risks saying out loud what those who benefit from the system want to keep hidden—their role in sustaining an economy which has forgotten its obligation to care for the poor and dispossessed.

In Luke, the patriarchal tradition of the 1st Century world puts pressure on Martha in her call to ministry, leaving her feeling alone and without the necessary support—a struggle that 21st century women know all too well.

So there it is—five short verses in which a whole world of conversation opens up around the role of women in the church, the powers that be which can limit those

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

roles, and the two fundamental instincts of followers of Christ: serving others in the name of Jesus and being drawn closer to God through Christ's teaching.

There's a famous legend told about Martha of Bethany that was popular in the Middle Ages. In this story, Martha becomes a traveling preacher after the resurrection of Jesus and ends up in a small French town with a chronic dragon problem.[6]

In good Medieval form, she manages to slay the dragon and, in doing so, wins the whole town over to Christianity.

In that same story, on that same trip, her sister Mary ends up founding a monastery in the wilderness. In other words, they both live out of the spiritual gifts they've been given: Martha acts and Mary studies. Martha represents an active faith, while Mary represents a contemplative faith.

"The two women embody different aspects of Christian discipleship in Luke's Gospel," observes Jennifer Wyant, "and both are lifted up as positive characters. They are both doing good things. There is no villain in this story."[7]

There is no villain in the story.

Perhaps, in some other encounter, unrecorded in the gospels, we can imagine Martha and Mary switching up roles when Jesus shows up again.

Mary, taking on the lion's share of the tasks of hospitality while her sister Martha sits in the circle with other disciples, taking in whatever he's serving up that day.

I like to imagine Martha free from the stereotype of the anxious and busy hostess. And Mary shifting her role so her sister, too, can sit at Jesus' feet.

We all get that privilege today, and every week, as we gather here, where Jesus, as both host and guest, offers himself for us once more…

- Feeding our need for community,
- offering us courage to oppose unjust systems,
- equipping us for service in this world God so loves.

Amen.

[6] Jennifer S. Wyant, *Working Preacher*, July 20, 2025. https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-3/commentary-on-luke-1038-42-6
[7] Ibid.