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Proper 11C
Peace, Seattle
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Luke 10:38-42

CLOSER

Ah, Mary! Ah, Martha! Five short verses and a whole world of conversation opens up around the role of women in the church 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.

Following on the heels of last week's parable of the Good Samaritan, which ends with the command: GO AND DO (LIKEWISE), this week's gospel seems to affirm not the posture of the do-er, Martha, but instead the learner, Mary, of whom Jesus says SHE HAS CHOSEN THE BETTER PART.

It's a text that gives us such an unvarnished look at one family's domestic dynamics that it feels almost too intimate—too close for comfort.

Family systems theorists talk about how relationships in families are characterized by a web of interlocking emotional triangles: Mother-Father-child; three siblings; parent, ex-spouse, child; grandmother, daughter, granddaughter…the combinations are infinite. And with the family systems lens in place as we read scripture, we can see triangles all over the place: Adam – Eve – God; Eve – Serpent – Adam; Cain – Abel – God; Isaac – Esau – Jacob…they're all over the place. In the New Testament one of the classic triangles is found in Jesus' story of a father and two sons. (Lk 15)

According to systems theory, the capacity for healthy relationships is defined by one's capacity to differentiate between one's self and others, and to resist being drawn into reactive behavior through the emotion-laden issues around which emotional triangles inevitably form.

So, if we were to analyze the scene in today's gospel we can clearly see the triangle at work: Martha, Mary, and Jesus; and the triangle coalesces around the issue of the proper place and role of women within the household, within the culture.

In fact, one take on the story suggests Jesus fails to stay out of the triangle that Martha invites him into. By taking sides, he effectively lifts up one sister and admonishes the other.

Can you imagine the conversation that takes place between the two after Jesus and his friends have left? I think we've all been in conversations like that.

Where do you locate your self in this story?
Are you Martha? Mary? Another member of the household who's learned to steer clear of the dynamic? A combination of all of the above?

I grew up in a household in which my mother, Shirley, was a composite of both Mary and Martha. The consummate hostess and entertainer, she also returned to seminary for advanced theological study after all but the last of her brood of eight had left the nest.

In fact, when mainline communions (including Lutherans) rejoined the centuries old conversation about the ordination of women 50 years ago, this affirmation of Mary's role as a student sitting at Jesus' feet became an important text in that conversation.

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More than any other gospel Luke's Jesus affirms the status of women as disciples, not simply females working behind the scenes to support what the men are doing. Luke often uses pairs of men and women to make his point. In both of Luke's two-volume work, women are expressly mentioned and included in the role of disciple and leader.

In America, we've lost the sense of how radical a proposal this was at that time when Rabbinic tradition held that it was better for the Torah be burned than fall into the hands of a woman. (Though we can glimpse the radicality on the teachings of fundamentalist faiths around the world that still suppress the role of women.)

What's really going on here in this brief story? Quite a bit actually, as we've begun to see.

On the one hand, Martha, in welcoming Jesus into her home, is obviously feeling the pressure of being a good hostess. We've all been there: when an honored guest is coming, there's a lot to do to get the house ready. Setting the menu, getting the groceries, preparing the guest quarters, vacuuming and sweeping, cleaning the bathrooms, making the outside of the home presentable, the list goes on.

We split those duties at our home, but it always seems like a rush no matter how much we try to work in advance. In our minds we hold that ideal image of what we would like our guests to experience, and when it appears that reality will fall short of that ideal….well, we can get anxious and grumpy…which seems to be where Martha ended up. Which is not all her fault, actually.

Because by sitting at Jesus feet instead of pulling her share of the load, Mary has moved outside the bounds of both family and cultural expectations…which makes Martha—who is sensitive to these things—even more anxious.

At which point Martha (here comes the triangle) appeals to Jesus to enforce the norm.
And what does Jesus do? Instead of dismissing Mary so she had attend to the things the culture (and her sister) have dictated she should be doing, he affirms that she is doing exactly what is needful at that moment.

We thought Martha was the host but, as it turns out, Jesus is the host—is ever the host—and it is he who is doing the serving here, and Mary has chosen to eat the meal.

This story is about the role of women in the church, for sure, but it's about more than that, too.
It's about how each of us, and each of our households, are called to take time away from our incessant DOING in order to LISTEN to a word from our Lord.

What might it mean for us to see Jesus as the host of our family life?

- Inviting us to put our over-scheduled lives aside on a regular basis?
- Taking time to sit at Christ's feet and take in whatever meal he's serving?
- How might we alter the shape of our household rhythm to allow for Christ to come into our midst to speak one simple, single word to anchor us, ground us as we go about all that day's "doing"?

At a recent conference I attended one of the topics was the use of silence within the worship service. Our Quaker brothers and sisters have practiced this tradition of waiting on the Spirit for centuries, but most Christian communions, including us Lutherans, are not very good at it. Silence in our go-go

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culture makes us nervous. We're constantly plugged in and turned on to something. One pastor at the conference recalled how he had learned at seminary that there was "no need or excuse" (!) for silence during worship.

At a time when we are inundated with words; when from every quarter words are used to sell, control, or convert us on any given issue; when every thought, no matter how feeble is a textable one and every event no matter how mundane, is tweetable, silence within the context of our gathered community life may be the most needful and the most counter-cultural act we can engage in!

We'll try 45 seconds of silence today after this sermon's "AMEN" and before our hymn of the day; consider it an invitation to think, to reflect, to take in the word Christ is serving you/us today… Maybe over time, silence—at least a few slivers of it—will become a friend.

Of course, silence and stillness can be misunderstood. It can be mistaken for "not working," "not doing," slacking; being idle. Today Mary shows us she was willing to take that risk. And for that, Jesus affirms her.

Having already set his face toward Jerusalem and all that would await him there, Jesus wants to take every opportunity to pass on the message he has been given to deliver. In affirming Mary, he affirms all women and indeed all disciples who are ready to stop the chores of life long enough to pay attention to what he has to say. And when the One we're listening to is the One who has risen from the dead, we ought to pay attention.

Perhaps, in some other encounter, unrecorded in the gospels, we can imagine Martha and Mary switching roles when Jesus comes again. Mary, taking on the lionshare of the tasks of hospitality while her sister Martha takes off her apron and to sit in the circle with the other disciples of the Lord, taking in whatever he's serving up that day.

I'd like to think of that possibility so that Martha doesn't have to perpetually live out that stereotype as the anxious and busy hostess. That Mary could shoulder a larger share of necessary tasks and thus provide the space so her sister can enjoy, too, what Mary came to know when she sat at Jesus' feet.

We all get that privilege today, and every week, as we gather here. And Jesus, as host, as guest, and as meal, offers himself for us once more. Giving us space for forgiveness, for a non-anxious place where we can start over once more. What a gift! Thanks be to God! Amen.