

HOW DO YOU INTERACT WITH JESUS?

TEXT: Luke 10:38-42

Luke tells us that Jesus went to the home of his longtime friends Mary and Martha. They welcomed him into their home and Martha got busy doing the many things a good hostess does - preparing food, setting the table, straightening the room, picking up the newspapers that have piled up...and on and on.

Let me ask you something. Please raise your hand if you have ever left a bed unmade on your way out the door to work. Now raise your hand if you have ever had a supreme pizza delivered and called it a balanced meal because, hey, it has protein, carbs, veggies (you know, onions and mushrooms) and even fruit if you asked for pineapple (which I certainly would never do). Who among you has neglected mowing the yard that one last time in the fall because the frost is going to kill it anyway? Have you ever called the dog over to the table after supper so you didn't have to sweep up the crumbs? What about those times when you screened your phone calls and let the answering machine pick up so you didn't have to speak to anyone?

Okay, now, how many of you have become so intensely involved in a conversation that you completely shut out all that was going on around you? Have you, by any chance, made a decision that perhaps disturbed those around you who felt that you had more urgent responsibilities and that you were shirking these responsibilities? Have you had a conversation with someone so interesting and compelling that nothing else in the world matters?

Whenever I read or hear this scripture passage in public, I can just see some of the women stiffen. The story may touch more feminist nerves than any other gospel story. It seems that some women have been labeled as a Mary or as a Martha. And some of us have labeled ourselves in one or the other role. Well, I believe that we all are a bit of both.

The story tells us that Martha was busy with the many tasks that needed to be done so that Jesus could be properly entertained. Mary, however, was simply sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him talk. The text does not tell us the content of the conversation. Maybe he was telling her stories about his ministry or just talking about life in general as two friends often do. Martha noted that Mary was not helping her in the chores that needed to be done and she complained to Jesus about it.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.” Any of us who were raised with siblings has surely heard such words more than once.

You know what I really like about this story? It’s a simple story of friends getting together. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Since he has to go through Bethany he decides to stop in and spend a little time with some old friends. It’s not a formal meeting, there are no parables told, there is no agenda. Just a guy catching up on the latest with some special people.

But like so many informal gatherings, the event takes the casual reader into some interesting territory. It is a study in contrasts. Martha’s reaction to her time with Jesus is one of busy-ness. Jesus is not just anyone passing through. He is someone very special and she wants to honor him by being a good hostess. The house must be clean, special food must be prepared and served. She wanted to be sure that all of Jesus’ needs were met and that everything was to his liking. Her interaction with Jesus was one of honoring him and providing for his physical needs.

But Mary did not share this activity. For her, interaction with Jesus was to sit and listen and drink in all that he had to say. She saw Jesus’ need as a chance to rest and sit and talk with his friends. Whatever they ate and whatever the house looked like was not important to him – or to Mary. His relationship with these friends and the opportunity to be with them was much more important than those extraneous factors.

Apparently, the uneven assignment of duties exasperated Martha. She certainly was miffed when she confronted Jesus about Mary's seeming indifference to the extra burden she had placed on her sister. "Lord, doesn't it concern you that my sister left me to serve alone? So, speak to her in order that she might help me". I think that Jesus' response surprised her just a bit. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary, in fact, has made the right choice, and it will not be taken from her."

I do not believe Jesus was being critical of Martha's complaint. He certainly understood the social customs of the time and how important hospitality was as a social context for the spread of his message. His response was less a condemnation of Martha's frenzied activity and more a commendation of Mary's posture as a disciple.

There are several messages in this passage, and they help us understand that our interaction with Jesus takes different and varied forms and considerations.

Although Martha struggles with what to do, she understands that there are competing interests. Should she care for the needs of others, or attend to the needs of her own soul? It appears that she is used to taking care of others and leaving herself and her needs for last. The problem with making caregiving our only way of life is that we stop listening for the voice of God. It is easier to *do* than it is to be still, even for a few moments. So we just keep moving.

But, in his recognition of Mary's choice to sit at his feet and listen, he recognizes that this is a legitimate place for a woman to be. She is given an equal place at the feet of Jesus. It is okay to let the work wait. We are given permission to sit and listen.

The example of the two sisters in this story is a metaphor for life for many of us. We have to have a balanced life, full of activity to take care of the chores of life, but we also must include times of simply sitting and resting and meditating on what is needed to give us emotional and spiritual strength. There is a reason we have a Sabbath built into

our week each seven days. God chose to be busy in the task of creation, but then rested for a day to enjoy what he had created. God commanded the people of Israel to follow the same pattern as they lived their lives. To this day, devout Jews set aside the seventh day of the week as a day of rest and worship and being with family. It is too bad that many Christians have decided that their Sabbath is not needed and instead they can spend it busily doing chores or activities that they can do any other day of the week.

Yes, Martha has busied herself with caring for her guest, and she exemplifies ideal hospitality. She represents the active life. Mary, on the other hand, represents the contemplative life as she sits at Jesus' feet. Both the active life and the contemplative life are needed; to choose one over the other can create a false dichotomy. Jesus reminds Martha, and he reminds us, that Mary's is "the better part", because actions - even acts of Christian charity and hospitality - if they are to be sustained, always follow *being*, that is, what we do flows naturally from who we are.

It's easy for us to identify with Martha in this story, but Jesus, in response to Martha's complaint, tells her that Mary is doing the right thing by doing nothing. It isn't that Martha is doing the wrong thing, but that Mary, and each of us, needs to stop, breathe, and meditate now and then.

So, I'm giving you permission to order that pizza. Okay, maybe not every night or the food police will arrest both of us, but when it's been a long day and you want to reconnect with the people you love, go for it. Allow yourself to make decisions about what is right for you, about what will remind you of the important things. Allow yourself to do the things that take care of others, and allow yourself to stop doing for others and take care of yourself by being in God's presence.