

## Mary and Martha

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 23, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

In the closing years of the twentieth century, it would take an incredibly insensitive preacher to read this passage from the Gospel about Mary and Martha without relating it to the role women are playing today in American society and in the church. When you think of the role assigned to women in Jewish and pagan society at the time of Jesus I'm pretty convinced that Jesus adopted a very liberal attitude toward the role of women.

Unfortunately, that liberal attitude of Jesus was lost by the church quite early in its history. And even today it's hard for a lot of Christians to hear the voice of Jesus as it relates to women. That's not to say that Jesus would endorse everything in the modern, secular, feminist movement. But I do believe that most all that's good and pure and holy and to be affirmed in the attempts of women to find fulfillment as God intended, can be traced to the liberal attitudes and actions of Jesus towards women.

I want to show what this incident involving Jesus, Mary and Martha meant for them. Every woman who's ever prepared a dinner for guests can sympathize with Martha. And probably most of us men would prefer to have a Martha around rather than a Mary - someone to fix dinner and set the table while we sit in the living room talking with our dinner guest. In the days of Jesus we know it was the role of women to wait on tables, to fix meals, to set the table, and to clean up afterwards. It still is the custom in many homes even today.

So it's easy for us to understand the feelings of Martha. Martha was concerned about serving Jesus and making him comfortable. That's why she was hustling and bustling about. She felt that Mary was being incredibly insensitive to the needs of Jesus and unfair to let her do all the work. Maybe Martha was also a little embarrassed for her sister, Mary, acting so out of character for a woman - so unfeminine. It was the role of *women* to fix meals. It was the role of *men* to learn from rabbis. The Jewish rabbi, Eleazar, a contemporary of Jesus, used to say, "It's better for the Torah (the Law of God) to be burned than to teach it to a woman. It's better to teach a woman lasciviousness (sexual immorality) than to teach her the Law of God." Mary, therefore, was doing something that only a man should be doing. So Martha must have felt resentment and embarrassment for her sister.

But Jesus defended Mary. He commended Mary. He even rebuked Martha. "Martha, Martha, you're worried and upset about many things, but one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what's better, and it won't be taken away from her." Some of you are familiar with Dorothy Sayers through her mystery stories. Some of you may not know that Sayers was also a very serious Christian. She once addressed a women's society way back in 1938. She entitled her address, "Are Women Human?" She said,

I think I have never heard a sermon preached on the story of Martha and Mary that did not attempt, somehow, somewhere, to explain away its text. Mary's of course, was the better part -- the Lord said so, and we must not precisely contradict Him. But we will be careful not to despise Martha. No doubt, he approved of her too. We could not get on without her, and indeed... we greatly prefer her. For Martha was doing a really feminine job, whereas Mary was just behaving like *any other disciple*.

So Mary was setting a revolutionary precedent by sitting, listening and

learning from Jesus. And Jesus was defending Mary. Jesus was affirming Mary for doing what was, for her day, an unfeminine and a masculine thing.

Now, why does Luke put this story in his Gospel? This story appears *only* in the Luke's Gospel. There were many stories that Luke could have chosen to exclude from his Gospel. John tells us that the world could not contain all the books that it would take to tell everything that Jesus said and did. So Luke had to exercise some kind of editorial decision as to what he'd include and what he'd leave out of his Gospel.

So Luke deliberately included this story about Mary and Martha. Luke saw in Jesus a man who really cared for women. Of all the Gospel writers, he highlights the way Jesus related to women. He tells us about the Virgin Mary. He tells us about Elizabeth and Anna. He had a special interest in telling us that Jesus inaugurated a new day for women. I'm sure that Luke had an evangelistic motive in choosing all those stories about the way Jesus related to women. He wanted women to know that Jesus loved women. He came to set women free. He came to enable women to achieve and to fulfill their God given potential. Luke wanted women - as well as men - to really listen to what Jesus said. He wanted to encourage them to break out of their man-made chains and mind-sets in order that they could sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from him. I'm sure that this was a reason Luke, alone of all the Gospel writers, chose to include this incident from the life of Jesus.

What's the Word of God for us today in this passage of Scripture? First, I

believe that when God's people ignore or unconsciously suppress the truth of God's Word, then the world will jump on the bandwagon and take up that theme which the church has neglected and pervert it to some extent - or present it in a thoroughly secular, non-Christian way. Instead of condemning the modern feminist movement as Christians have done so often, we should be leading the way in presenting the liberating message of Jesus for women - to single woman with children - to single women without children - to divorced women - to widows - to businesswomen - to housewives.

The Church has lost some of the brightest and most talented people because of the Church's insensitivity to women. Many of the women involved in the most radical and objectionable aspects of the modern feminist movement were baptized, confirmed, and raised in the Christian church but somehow they never heard the liberating Word of Jesus. Perhaps it was because they were encouraged to do the feminine thing, like Martha, and discouraged from doing what our culture felt to be unfeminine. As a result they never really sat at the feet of Jesus or heard his liberating Word.

But there's another lesson in this passage for all of us. Luke places this incident right after the story of the Good Samaritan - right after Jesus told a lawyer to "go and do". But in the story of Mary and Martha, Luke wants us to know that Jesus didn't come simply to inspire social activism. Of course, Christ wants us to know how necessary it is that all our activities and involvements in the world are built on the foundation of personal piety and respect for the Word of

Christ. Christian activism must spring from hearing the Word of God.

After hearing the parable of the Good Samaritan (as we did last week) it's hard for me *not* to see Martha as the stronger character and the more mature disciple than her sister. Martha is full of good works. She's entirely free from the selfishness that seeks its own pleasure. But she earns a rebuke from Jesus because she hasn't learned that unselfishness, service, and even sacrifice can be spoiled by self-pity. Good works can become a drudgery.

So often the church is polarized, on the one hand, between activist Christians involved in peace issues, civil rights, women's rights, and social justice and pietistical Christians, on the other hand, who never do anything but go to prayer meetings and Bible studies. If the Good Samaritan and Martha represent the activist side of the Christian faith, Mary represents the pietistical side. Most of us feel that, somehow, we have to combine Mary and Martha - hearing the Word of God and going out into the world in active service. Both are needed. But none of us are so balanced that the activist and the pietist are balanced absolutely. We need to recognize that some of us have a primary calling to be a Mary, and others to be a Martha.

William Stringfellow, one of the foremost Christian activists in the sixties used to speak of a private and a public faith. We need a public faith like Martha and the Good Samaritan - a faith that gets involved with people and their needs. But we also need a private faith that sits at the feet of Jesus, like Mary, and listens to the Word of God.

Where do you need balance in your life? Are you like Martha, "distracted with much serving"? Are you so distracting by all the good things that you're doing that your spiritual life-line to Christ is cut and you're losing your power to serve? The fruit of Christian service ripens and matures only so long as we have genuine roots in the words and Spirit of Jesus Christ. Those things are developed and strengthened by personal prayer and meditation on the Word of Christ in Scripture. Or are you so much like Mary that you never get around to helping Martha as she tries to serve Christ?

Let us pray: Eternal God, you draw near to us in Christ and make yourself our guest. Amid the cares of our daily lives, make us attentive to your voice and alert to your presence, that we may treasure your word above all else. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.