

**Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 7/22/07**  
**St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York**  
**Text: Luke 10:38-42**

My relationship with the Mary and Martha story is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, I love it. I appreciate that its main characters are women, which is so often not the case in the stories of our sacred text. The sparse description here invites me to use my imagination to fill in the details, and I happily comply.

I picture Martha welcoming Jesus into her home – joyful at seeing him, eager to hear what he has to say; yearning to tell him what's on her mind. But when he arrives, with some of his disciples, he's tired and hungry. Martha is a considerate and thoughtful friend, and she wants to make Jesus comfortable after his journey. She shows him the most pleasant spot in the house, where he can sit and relax, and she gives him something cool to drink. Then, she and her sister, Mary, sit down with Jesus for some quality time.

In the scenario that I imagine, what Jesus has to say is profound and compelling. But after a few minutes, Martha can't help but begin to think ahead to what she needs to do next. Is there enough food in the house for their friend and the other guests? Is the meal that she's planned for the evening special enough? If Jesus is really hungry, maybe dinner should be served an hour earlier. If so, she really should start putting things together now.

I see Martha slipping away to the kitchen. At first, she works quietly, straining to hear the conversation while chopping vegetables. But as the minutes pass, she becomes annoyed. No one has even noticed that she left. She starts banging things around a bit, but Mary doesn't take the hint and join her – how could Mary be so oblivious to what's involved in pulling off this meal? Martha mentally reviews all the things that Mary's done in the last few days that Martha considers careless and irresponsible. By the time Martha is setting the table (which, by the way, is Mary's job), Martha has worked herself into a snit.

I love Martha, because I so identify with her. I imagine many of us do. There's so much work to be done, and not nearly enough time. Multi-tasking becomes a way of life – the only way, it seems, that we can even begin to stay on top of things. At Phelps Hospital on Friday morning, I found myself trying to do sermon research while on my cell phone, checking on funeral details, as a technician was drawing blood from my arm. This is a crazy way to live!

Once Martha leaves the kitchen to demand some help, I become less enamored with the story. Her strategy is so clearly flawed. Her gripe is with Mary, and I feel embarrassed for her when she triangulates and brings her complaint to Jesus instead. Jesus' response just makes me angry. It sounds to me like an unfair rebuke. I want him to be nicer to Martha, because her complaint seems legitimate. I really hate that Jesus doesn't suggest that everyone move to the kitchen, share the tasks like chopping the vegetables and setting the table, and talk together while the work is done by all who will eat the meal.

I love this story, because it completely draws me in. But I get so absorbed in the relationships

and the details of the situation as I imagine them, that I miss the point of the story.

Biblical scholars suggest that Luke has written this story to help the early church understand discipleship. The Mary and Martha account shouldn't even stand alone, as it does in our lectionary. It should be read and heard as part of last week's Gospel. You may remember that when a lawyer asks Jesus what one must do to inherit eternal life, the answer is to love God with all one's heart, soul, strength, and mind; and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The story of the Good Samaritan that immediately follows is an example of how one loves one's neighbor. The story of Mary and Martha that comes after that is an example of how one loves God. Like Mary, one sits at the feet of Jesus - quiet, still, and undistracted. Like Mary, one listens with careful attention.

Our relationship with God is so much on the run in our hectic and noisy lives. Yet, the desire of our heart is to follow the way of Jesus. We truly do want to show compassion to those in need, as Jesus did, joining him in the building of the kingdom of God. Loving God by basking in God's presence and love sounds really nice. But there's so little time and so very much to do, and sitting at the feet of Jesus is the first thing to go because, frankly, it just doesn't seem to accomplish anything.

Actually, we can't do the work of the kingdom well or long-term without stillness and silence at Jesus' feet. Jesus himself was at least as busy as we are, and he regularly left the crowds that he taught, healed, and fed and withdrew to a lonely place, to be still before God. Theologian Albert Nolan notes that "... busyness is the supreme distraction. It distracts us from self-awareness and from the awareness of the *real* world. It distracts us from awareness of God. Busyness leaves us stranded in the upside-down world that Jesus tried to turn right side up. Constant busyness is a bit like sleepwalking. No matter how good our intentions or how altruistic our work, relentless busyness can make us like Don Quixote: fighting windmills instead of real dangers and threats. Waking up, becoming more fully conscious and facing the realities of life, requires a certain measure of silence and solitude, as it did for Jesus." (*Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, pp. 91-92)

May we try something radical? May we take just five minutes, right now, to sit in stillness and in silence at the feet of Jesus? Isn't our corporate worship a logical time and place for us to bask in God's presence and love?

A signal that sounds like this (striking a Tibetan singing bowl) will begin and end the five minutes. So, straighten your spine, put both feet on the floor, and close your eyes. Breathe deeply a couple of times.

Be still and bask in the love and the presence of God. (The bowl is struck now and in five minutes.)