

July 21, 2019

Proverbs 31: 10-31; Luke 10:38-42

Sisters

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A woman named Martha welcomed him. She had a sister, Mary. Sisters. Different personalities. Different values. Different approaches to life. Living under the same roof. Did they love each other? Yes. Did they fight with each other? Most likely.

How do I know? I have a sister. I love her. And we've had our differences.

Jesus drops in to see these sisters, and he brought the party (About 12 other guys, but who's counting?). Martha welcomes him in her own way – making snacks, finding seats for everybody, pouring the wine. Mary welcomes him in her own way – dropping everything to sit with them and hear tales from the road. My guess is that this particular difference between the sisters has caused a rub before.

When it becomes clear that Mary isn't budging from the living room, Martha interrupts and asks for help. The Message offers us a better translation of family dynamics for the snarky comment we might expect having come from families ourselves, "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me?"

Let's pause for a moment right there. Have you ever been the outsider in a family situation when that kind of comment drops heavy as a stone in the middle of a room? You know there's a back-log of frustration. Mary probably always leaves that extra glass or two lying around the house. Martha doesn't feel like she can stop and pay attention until her role of gracious host has been fulfilled. What do you do in that situation? Back away slowly? Try to

soothe both personalities? Offer to join Martha in the kitchen? Invite her to join in - saying the dishes can wait? Or nudge Mary to go and help - saying the stories can wait?

I don't know exactly how I'd respond, but I bet it wouldn't be how Jesus responded. He took a clear side between these sisters, and told Martha that she was fussing too much and working herself up over nothing. He poured fuel on that fire, and then said Mary chose the better option and it won't be denied her. The story ends there. *Um yeah, the story ends there.*

The next chapter begins with - "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place." Makes sense to me. The gospel writer leaves us hanging on Jesus getting the last word, when my guess is that it was anything but the last word.

Did Jesus and his friends get kicked down the road after he opened his big mouth? We don't quite know. Was there a fight between Martha and Mary, or did the tension just seethe underneath the surface? Did the anger turn toward Jesus at that point? Or, did Jesus' unexpected comment clear the air and allow both Mary and Martha to laugh and relax? We don't know the rest of the story, and that's OK. It gives us the opportunity to reflect on what it means to us.

There's probably no one I have compared myself to more than my one and only sister. It's silly. I know. She's her own person. I'm my own person. Comparing oneself to anyone is an exercise in frustration and futility anyway. But it happens. And most of us grew up in families where there were expectations, and divisions, and hurt feelings when it seemed as though someone got away with doing less and another felt like they had to do it all. In order to form a solid identity, we differentiate ourselves from others, usually the ones closest to us in our formative years. As we solidify our own particular role in the family, we begin to see those other personalities as inflexible and notice those things that are different as the annoyances that get

stuck under our skin. I'm one way, and my sister is another way – I've let those differences get in the way of seeing how there's also a lot we have in common. I like to think I'm old enough and wise enough not to throw hurtful words her way, but I also probably have perceptions of her life that are based on old understandings that are no longer true. I love her. And there are differences. And that's what adds texture and vibrancy to our relationship as family.

I happen to feel a lot of solidarity with both Mary and Martha in this story. First off, I understand exactly where Martha is coming from. That's why I paired this text with the "Hymn to a Good Wife" from Proverbs. It's the Martha stereotype, the same one that haunts women in every advertisement designed to get her to buy a product that will make her life easier or sexier. She can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never let you forget you're her man. That's the Proverbs 31 wife, same old story as the "Enjoli" perfume ad from the late 70's. She's the one who does it ALL, and makes it look effortless. I also can be the Mary. I can lose myself in the study of God's Word, especially when it involves long and meandering conversations that, until fairly recently, were still considered the domain of men who had time to sip Scotch and ponder connections between God and the world. I could happily brush off kitchen responsibilities and order pizza if a bunch of unexpected guests were to show up at my door. There have been times when I have been thankful for Jesus' words to Mary, because they have refreshed my ability to reject the hardened notions of what it means to be the "perfect woman."

So, I do hope that's what Jesus really was doing by saying something so unconventional. He wasn't choosing a favorite between the sisters, or really saying that one was right and the other wrong. I prefer to think he was saying that it's OK to not get stuck in a role. It's OK to let go of expectations. There are times when being different can be the better choice, because it's the

right choice in the moment, or because it's the faithful choice for how we are being called to lead our lives.

One may also ask, "Why did Luke include this story in a gospel account about Jesus?" It seems like a relatively ordinary family dispute. So what if Mary and Martha were typical siblings? What's the point? But read in context, Luke may have noticed that Jesus was using something as ordinary as a family argument to talk about the kind of radical love he intended to let loose in the world. Remember that Luke's gospel especially is the up-ender of all the hierarchies. He wants to claim that Jesus flips the script and makes the world a different place – at the very least for his followers. This is one of those moments for Jesus – really no matter how the sisters reacted to him afterward. He was claiming that Mary could be herself and that Martha could let go of her own obsession with being the hostess with the most-ess. Not all women have to hang out in the kitchen. Perhaps not a radical truth – but an important one nonetheless. The patterns of behavior that we find so constricting in family life can be changed, or softened, or let go – and we can live our lives according to love, and in the moment.

This is good news for women who are inclined to follow Jesus, and Luke would be the first to tell you, it isn't your typical script. We've seen Christianity time and again revert to the same tired and forced gender roles that have always slunk around. We may even be living through a re-assertion of those particularly rigid gender stereotypes in our own time. And whereas I can clearly say that it's not good news for women when the "perfect woman" trope rears its ugly head, it's not good news for men either when standards of masculinity restrict who they feel they can become. I am glad we are living in a time when we are starting to question the two-gender system as purely an either/or, with consequences that leave lasting wounds on those forced to express themselves in ways that just don't fit. We have more to gain when we can

honor the humanity in us all, however we choose to express our personhood. None of us wants to be stuck. Not by whatever the current expectations are for our gender. Not by the role we got stuck with in our family. None of us benefits from having to live up to some unrealistic way of being. Mary and Martha have still not escaped how we see them in this story – though more has been written about them than this – and they were fully human beings with a wide range of thoughts and understandings about what it was to be who they were in their own time and place.

The arguments that guilt us and create divisions can come from our family of origin like Mary and Martha, or they can be represented by religious sides like Peter and Paul. They may be based in roles, or personalities, or strong opinions. Jesus does look like he's picking a side here, Mary's side. But I do wonder if he is simply standing on the side of being able to look at the situation differently. He turns the angle a bit so we can see how Mary and Martha were stuck, and how we get ourselves stuck, and maybe Jesus is giving us that moment of freedom to simply be. What Jesus offers his followers is a life of freedom. Paul is the one who talks the most about being set free in Christ. His life did a complete turn- around. Therefore, he was able to preach that we are set free to follow love over legalism, to bend toward truth rather than get stuck by tradition. It is a gift, a gift that maybe we can see more clearly by writing our own ending to what happened after Jesus was bold enough to step into the middle of an argument between sisters.

Amen.

Proverbs 31 - Hymn to a Good Wife

¹⁰⁻³¹ A good woman is hard to find,
and worth far more than diamonds.
Her husband trusts her without reserve,
and never has reason to regret it.
Never spiteful, she treats him generously
all her life long.
She shops around for the best yarns and cottons,
and enjoys knitting and sewing.
She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places
and brings back exotic surprises.
She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast
for her family and organizing her day.
She looks over a field and buys it,
then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.
First thing in the morning, she dresses for work,
rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started.
She senses the worth of her work,
is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.
She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth,
diligent in homemaking.
She's quick to assist anyone in need,
reaches out to help the poor.
She doesn't worry about her family when it snows;
their winter clothes are all mended and ready to wear.
She makes her own clothing,
and dresses in colorful linens and silks.
Her husband is greatly respected
when he deliberates with the city fathers.
She designs gowns and sells them,
brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops.
Her clothes are well-made and elegant,
and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.
When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say,
and she always says it kindly.

She keeps an eye on everyone in her household,
and keeps them all busy and productive.
Her children respect and bless her;
her husband joins in with words of praise:
"Many women have done wonderful things,
but you've outclassed them all!"
Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.
The woman to be admired and praised
is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-GOD.
Give her everything she deserves!
Festoon her life with praises!

Luke 10 - Mary and Martha

³⁸⁻⁴⁰ As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand."

⁴¹⁻⁴² The Master said, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."