

## A Tale of Two Sisters

Luke 10:38-42

Crossroads Christian Church

Colossians 1:15-28

July 17, 2016 Pentecost 9C

Here's something you may not have known about me. I'm an only child. Sandy is also an only child, so we were wed as an only and an only. We're both pretty good about sharing, we didn't grow up lonely, and we weren't spoiled, just to challenge three myths about being onlies.

But when we decided to raise three children, we were amazed at how much more complex life could be. The number of interactions—okay, fights, complaints, accusations, denials, etc.—grew exponentially with each kid we had. So sibling rivalry, infighting, conflict, and yes, blessing, was something that we had never experienced as children, but boy, did we learn about them as adults.

Today's gospel lesson is a family story, and that helps make it one that we can all relate to—because for better or worse, we know families, right? We've grown up in families, many of us have formed families, and we've all related to our extended families. And you know when company comes to dinner and you try to command, threaten, plead, or bribe the children to be on their best behavior? Today's story is not about the children, but about how the adults acted, and acted out, when Jesus came to dinner. Let me tell it in story form, as if I were a friend of the family's telling another friend of the family's about "Guess who came to dinner?"

Jesus had so many good friends because Jesus was a good friend. He didn't really have a home of his own, but in one way he had homes in towns all over Galilee and Judea both—the homes of his friends. Three of his closest friends were Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—two sisters and a brother—who live in a town we call Bethany, just northeast of Jerusalem.

One day, they were expecting Jesus to come through Bethany, and he had promised to stop for supper. What excitement! Martha, being the special person that she is, expressed her excitement through lots of hard work. Ever since the Sabbath ended, Martha had been busy cooking, baking, scrubbing, scouring, dusting—and fretting.

Mary helped with all this, of course, but Martha is always the one who takes charge. Mary always goes along with her older sister and tries to do her share. And she did this time—up to the moment Jesus walked in the door. Then Mary, being the special person that she was, focused all her attention to Jesus, hanging on every word.

Jesus came a bit earlier than expected. The oil had not been put in the lamps for the evening, the bread was not yet cooled, nor the stew cooked fully, nor the table set, and there was still cleaning to be done. And there he

was! The guest was there, and Mary and Martha weren't yet ready to show him full hospitality. They greeted him, of course, and welcomed him in as the loving friend that he was, and gave him water to wash himself from the dusty journey. Martha apologized that not everything was ready. Jesus said that it was all right, not to worry. He didn't expect them to know that he would arrive early.

Mary just sat down at Jesus' feet, along with the disciples, and began asking questions. Martha glared and tried to catch her eye. Mary listened raptly as Jesus told his stories. Martha a-hemmed. Mary's eyes were on Jesus. Martha a-hemmed again. Mary asked Jesus yet another question about God and the meaning of life. Martha a-hemmed yet a third time, arched her eyebrows, and kept swinging her chin toward the kitchen. Mary just sat at Jesus' feet, listening, just like one of the men, like a male disciple of a rabbi might, as bold as you please.

Finally, Martha rolled her eyes again and stormed into the cooking area. She clanked the clay jars that stored the food—not quite hard enough to break them, but definitely hard enough so that anyone could tell that at least *she* knew what responsibility and hospitality were really all about.

Before too long, all the food was ready to put on the table—a 2-person job if ever there was one, with a meal for that many guests, and still Mary had nothing better to do than to sit and listen. Martha couldn't stand it any longer. If Mary wouldn't listen to her sister, maybe she would listen when Jesus became aware of the situation.

"Teacher, don't you care that I'm doing all this all by myself, and my sister isn't helping me at all?"

Poor Martha! Exasperated and at wit's end, trying to do the right thing. Poor Mary! She was so devoted to Jesus that she hadn't realized she was letting her sister down. And then there was Jesus, stuck in the middle. But then with Jesus, that happened a lot.

If you only could have seen the look of love on Jesus' face; a love directed at both of them. "Martha, Martha," he said, repeating her name with tenderness. "You are so worried and distracted by so many things."

And Martha was indeed like the western hero who jumped on his horse and rode off in both directions at the same time. Jesus finished. "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and that can't be taken away from her."

Then Martha realized—instead of focusing on Jesus, her attention had been scattered on all the many tasks that hospitality demanded of her. Mary had paid attention to her guest—and he had repaid her with the words of life. Now that Jesus had help Martha see herself, she too could give her attention to the one who wanted to give her those same words of life.

That's the story. In writing his gospel, Luke often places stories together that balance one another. Last Sunday you heard the story of the Good Samaritan. That was a story about hospitality—about a Samaritan who became a good neighbor by taking a risk and helping a victim of violent crime. He provided first aid, he rode the victim to safety, and he paid for his medical care. But in today's story, poor Martha is doing her best to show hospitality to Jesus and his disciples—dinner for 13 houseguests! She worked hard to make Jesus feel welcome. So why did Jesus seem to treat her "offering" as of less value than that of Mary, who just sat and listened?

Martha was indeed offering a valuable gift to Jesus in the gift of hospitality, and Jesus never denied the value of that gift. As we know from other stories about Mary and Martha, Jesus appreciated both the outspoken but hard-working Martha and the less practical, more impulsive and demonstrative Mary. In this instance, though, the key word is *distracted*. All of her energies were going into her task and into her anger at her sister. To be truly blessed, Jesus was trying to teach, you have to be able to give and to receive, and to know with humility the appropriate response for a given time.

Jesus, you see, reverses the role of guest and host. Jesus graciously receives, but he also has something very important that he wants to give. He had offered a banquet of love and acceptance to both of them, but only Mary had noticed. By using Martha's name twice, Jesus was not trying just to "break through" and get her attention, he was also calling her to recognize her own personal value and her own needs to be fed as well as to feed. Mary had received a "good portion" of this banquet already, and that should not be begrudged. Now, Martha was invited to receive the love and good news that Jesus offered.

This isn't a story just about women. It speaks to all of us. We all, men, women, boys and girls, have something of the busy and frantic Martha and of the open and receiving Mary in all of us. Some of us are closer to one or to another. This church leans somewhat to the Martha side. You have great hospitality. You're hard workers. You go out of your way to make people feel welcome. And that's all good. But we all need to find some balance, to find time to receive God's love as well as to share it; time to pray and reflect as well as to work hard; time to be fed by the grace of God as well as time to feed others. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon