

Sunday, August 31st, 2025 - Year C - Proper 17

Luke 10:38-42 (CEB)

Perspectives: Mary and Martha

My two favorite Bible translations are the New Revised Standard Version and the Common English Bible. The reason I favor these translations is because they are easy to read and understand - but also because these two translations do a *really* good job of honoring the original biblical languages.

And that matters because if we believe that scripture tells the story of God for the people of God, then we want to make sure we are interpreting scripture as correctly as possible, right?

The people who translate scripture from Greek to English are given a *difficult* task. They have to pay close attention to the language, the context, the grammatical structure, and the syntax of the original biblical texts in order to bring the meaning of the text over to English in the best possible way.

One important thing to understand about biblical Greek is that there are many words that do not have a precise, one-size-fits-all English counterpart. So translators often have to make a choice when it comes to bringing the Greek over into English, and they do their best using context and grammar and syntax and whatnot. And sometimes, I think translators make unfortunate choices. This passage is an example of that.

Many major English translations end this passage by saying "Mary has chosen the *better* part." And I think one of the biggest mistakes translators have made is in choosing the word "better" here. Because "better" has implications, especially in the English language!

We live in a society that loves competition and that loves comparison. So the use of the word "better" here has often implied to us that 1) Mary and Martha are in competition with one another, and 2) Mary is winning! She is better than Martha!

And we believe that when someone is better than us, then it means even the things we are doing well don't really matter, or it means we are doing something wrong. As long as someone does it better, then we have somehow failed.

I do not like how often our translations use the word "better" here. The Greek word in this text has several translation options - and *any* of them would make more sense here! The Greek word could be translated as "good;" "beneficial;" or even "useful" - but we went with "better!"

Our translation has done a disservice to this text. It is a mistranslation of the word. And this mistranslation has led to a gross misinterpretation of this passage. And in light of this, it leads us to ask a question: *What does faithfulness look like?*

Our misinterpretation of this text has led us to do two things with this passage. One of the things we do with this passage is that we turn it into an "either/or" situation. We believe the lesson to be learned from this story is that either you are a Martha, or you are a Mary.

If you are a Martha, it means you have a good work ethic; it means you have a servant's heart; it means you are usually looking for ways to serve others. But being a Martha also means you don't focus enough on God. It means you are too distracted by other things, you are too stressed out, you are too worried about the wrong things.

On the other hand, if you are a Mary, then you are focused on what *really* matters. You are focused on God; you don't let silly things distract you; you choose what is *better*. But the downside to being a Mary is that you might be seen as lazy; you have no work ethic; you lack ambition; you wait for others to do things for you.

The problem with this is that it misses the point of this passage. This story doesn't exist as an "either/or" situation. It doesn't exist so we can ask if we identify more as a Martha or more as a Mary.

And the other thing that we have done with this passage is that we have used it to argue that there is no room for stress or worry in the Christian life.

Often, when I have heard this passage preached, it is usually done so in a way that villainizes Martha. We villainize Martha. We villainize her for choosing work over focusing on Jesus. We villainize her for voicing her concern over the fact that Mary is not helping her.

And so when we tell this story, we often tell it with an emphasis on not being like Martha. Martha is too stressed out; too worried about the wrong things. Martha's stress keeps her from focusing on God. If she really trusted Jesus, then she wouldn't be stressed out, and she wouldn't care about the work that needed to be done. Mary gets it right; Martha gets it wrong.

There are *many* things wrong with this - among the things wrong with it is the fact that it dismisses stress, which is the road that leads to us dismissing suffering. But it is also wrong because when we interpret this story in this way, then we tend to think faithfulness looks like "only focusing on God."

Here's the thing: faithfulness is *not* an either/or. Faithfulness is not a one-size-fits all. Faithfulness shows up in *many* different forms - and they are all good and beautiful and pleasing in God's sight.

Mary is faithful by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his teaching. Mary's faithfulness is good and beautiful and pleasing in God's sight. But Martha is also faithful through her acts of service and her work. And Martha's faithfulness is good and beautiful and pleasing in God's sight, too.

In this story, the way Martha embodies faithfulness is different from the way Mary embodies faithfulness - but instead of comparing their acts of faithfulness to each other; instead of deciding which act of faithfulness is "better," we should celebrate the fact that *both* of these women embody faithfulness.

The way you embody faithfulness might look different from the way the person sitting next to you embodies faithfulness - but we should celebrate that faithfulness is being embodied! We should celebrate faithfulness in all of its forms!

It is also important to note that Jesus is not mad at Martha here. Jesus is not disappointed in Martha here. Jesus reminds Martha that Mary's faithfulness looks different than her own (because she needs that reminder) - but that doesn't mean Jesus doesn't think Martha is being faithful. He celebrates the faithfulness of both women, and we should, too. All faithfulness - *all* faithfulness - is good and beautiful and pleasing in God's sight.

Faithfulness is not an either/or situation. You are not either a Martha or a Mary - you are *you*. Your faithfulness is unique to you - and sometimes that means your faithfulness looks like Martha, and sometimes it means your faithfulness looks like Mary, and sometimes it means your faithfulness looks like something else all together.

And each time, that faithfulness is good. Each time, God rejoices in your faithfulness because God rejoices in you. God delights in your faithfulness; God does not compare you to anyone else. God does not say "You are more faithful than this person" or "You are less faithful than that person" - God simply delights in your faithfulness. Because God delights in you. Just as you are. Whether you are doing all of the things or simply sitting at God's feet; God delights in you, and that is great news!

This passage invites us to new life by inviting us to embody faithfulness however it looks for us. So may you go and be faithful in whatever way faithfulness looks like to you.

Maybe your faithfulness looks like cleaning the house and cooking a meal; and maybe it looks like going home

and taking a well-needed nap. Maybe your faithfulness looks like inviting someone into your home; maybe it looks like calling a friend just to see how they are doing. Maybe your faithfulness looks like *doing*; maybe it looks like just simply *being*. Whatever it is that your faithfulness looks like, go and be faithful, as the God who goes before you is faithful.

God of love, you are faithful to us; may we learn that faithfulness shows up in many different forms, and it is good and beautiful and pleasing in your sight. May we learn to stop comparing our own faithfulness to the faithfulness of another. May we learn to delight in faithfulness every time it is embodied no matter what it looks like, because that is what you do. We pray all of this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; one God. Amen.