



# *Sixth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe*



Sunday 17 July 2022

### READINGS

Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

## *Martha or Mary*

In my early years of ordained ministry, there used to be a practice among the women's church groups – of celebrating the Mary and Martha Day. One would often eavesdrop on the conversational exchanges among the ladies: “Are you a Mary or a Martha?” Oh I'm definitely a Mary or a Martha or I'm a bit of both really.

I imagined that these ladies would have spent time hearing interpretations of today's gospel passage, and each year, they would gather to tray and understand yet again the conflict implicit in the choice between the two characters. Martha, we often say, is the “active” one, rushing around, busying herself with the demanding practicalities of life. Mary, on the other hand, is the “contemplative” one, resting attentively at Jesus' feet, engaged in what has traditionally been seen as a prayerful, intellectual encounter with her Lord. Two sisters, two followers of Jesus, and, we are told, two diverging possibilities for discipleship, with Mary's prayerful quality being “the better part” and, therefore, the one to which we are encouraged to aspire.

When I listened to the ladies conversing, I couldn't help thinking that they were approaching the story of the two women, as a sort of spiritual personality test. Much like you would hear Jungian psychology students describing themselves as either introverted or extroverted or listening to people describing their personality types on the Enneagram scale as a definite 1 or a 5. We love personality tests because they offer personal insights and open up possible areas of personal development and growth if used with openness. We are always seeking an in-depth glimpse of ourselves as we strive to understand who we are and how we relate to other people.

And so, when we hear Luke's Gospel today, we might ask ourselves: which one are you? Martha or Mary? Which is more important? Busy or mindful? Active or contemplative? One who likes to serve or one who simply likes to bask in worship? Perhaps, as you hear the question right now, you can already feel the pressure of having the right answer, of needing to measure up, of choosing that “better part.”

But could it be that we are forced into a false dichotomy?

I think it is false, quite simply, because it is not necessarily the choice that Jesus, by way of this text, asks us to make. Jesus is not setting the two sisters as rivals – one against the other, nor is he creating a

hierarchy of styles of discipleship. The dichotomies that we read into the text are of our own making, because we have become adept at reading the world through the lenses of labels and categories. When Jesus tells Martha that Mary has “chosen the better part” he is not challenging Martha’s “personality,” nor is Jesus rejecting Martha’s busyness as a host, but is instead gently calling her back to the fullness of herself, which can only be realized fully in Christ. A point which that saintly man, Augustine of Hippo makes in saying: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” - This restlessness is that desire to be filled and fulfilled by God. We all have it. We try to ignore at times. Which is what I believe Jesus was reminding Martha of – that her very being is grounded and anchored in God – that even this good, hard, and necessary work that she is engaged in, should be first grounded in Jesus Christ.

Martha lives and serves, as we all do, in the name of Jesus. It is not that the practicalities of hosting and feeding people are to be overlooked in favour of the life of quiet contemplation. Rather, Jesus sets the goals of life in their proper order. The Word of God comes first, since “humanity does not live on bread alone” (Luke 4:4). The cooking and the cleaning and the mending and the tending of small, daily things — they must not be an end in themselves. Martha’s exasperation is expressed in her words “Lord, do you not care...” Martha has been so distracted by focusing on herself that she has forgotten who Jesus is. Jesus simply wants Martha not to lose sight of him, knowing, as he does, how easy it is to become “worried and distracted by many things.” Have you noticed how, like Martha, we often lose sight of this most important revelation? In our daily lives we always have the nagging sensation that we should be doing more, something more productive. And perhaps that’s because below the surface, our sense of identity is tied up with productivity – its all about action, struggle and achievement. And so we feel like we have to prove ourselves in every situation that we face.

Could it be that deep down Martha was scared of what she would find if she stopped to take a breath; the fear that would show up as guilt when she’s not ‘working hard’. So to avoid that guilt, she struggles forward like her life depends on it. Martha is caught up in the dichotomy of doing and being. Doing is what you do. It’s the actions you take. It’s the decisions you make. It’s your behaviour and all its visible manifestations. Being is who you are. It’s what’s underneath all of the doing. It’s your qualities, your thought patterns, and your conditioning. It’s the pattern of beliefs that you hold about yourself and your environment. It’s your worldview. So, even though it looks like Jesus here is criticizing Martha and commending Mary, what he offers, then, is not a competitive comparison between Mary and Martha as standards of greater and lesser forms of discipleship, nor is it a distinction between the benefits of being and doing, but instead it is the continuous choice that each of us must make, in all that we do, between remembering Jesus or forgetting him. This is a Gospel story that calls us to remember. A Gospel story in which Martha is asked as we are, to do this - all of this (working, serving, contemplating) in remembrance of him. This is what Martha needed to remember, and it is a necessary reminder whenever we sit down, as individuals or as a church community, to consider who we are and where we are going.

So going back to those conversations I used to listen to: I want to say no, you are not a Martha. You are not a Mary. All of us are both of them, and neither, for sometimes, love requires us to strive for achievements and other times to be still. They are not separate paths, but merely different ways of finding our way back home to the source - God. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” is a call to to recognize our own restlessness, to step away from distraction, and to meet God in service of humanity – in word and sacrament.

The good news of this passage is: You are a follower of Jesus. A servant of Jesus. A lover of Jesus.

Amen.