Faith and Works (preached March 16, 2025)

Text: Luke 10:38-42

Today’s text seems straight forward and easy to understand, but I find it very complicated and problematic.

Martha is quite verbal in our story. She asks, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.” Mary, on the other hand sits at Jesus’s feet listening to what he was saying. Jesus apparently reprimands Martha with words dripping of condescensiondescribing Mary as choosing “the better part.”

What would be a better way to look at this text? I’m not sure. Why would the Lukan community tell this story in this way, portraying Martha as overly anxious about many things and portraying Mary as being focused on the one thing that really mattered? It’s almost as though they pitted the two women against each other in some kind of rivalry. It’s hard not to read the story in this way, which is why I could take issue with Luke’s Jesus and ask, “Why chide Martha for being distracted by many things? Why scold her when she really needed more help? If it was up to me, I’d take her request seriously, put on an apron, and get to work.”

What if the text has been mistranslated and misinterpreted? The actual Greek does not say “Mary has chosen the better part” but rather “Mary has chosen a good portion.”

In welcoming Jesus to their home, Martha wanted things to be perfect and she assumed that her sister would help with some of the details. It’s not just that Mary isn’t helping, it’s that Mary is taking the position of a disciple (sitting at Jesus’s feet), which is traditionally only open to men in this culture. In his reply, Jesus recognizes Martha’s frustration at being “distracted by many tasks” but he reminds her that what Mary is doing in visiting with and listening to Jesus is also a good portion of what goes into a wonderful dinner party. Contrary to the gender expectations of the time, Mary chose to use her talents not in setting the table or fetching the water, but in participating in the exchange among guests as they share their lives and their dreams while dinner was cooking.

In some creative and critical readings, Martha’s service, her diakonia, is not housework per se, but cryptically symbolizes a ministry of prayer and word just like that of the apostles in the early church (see Acts 1.25; 6.4). Whether Martha’s diakonia was kitchen work or apostolic ministry, she clearly felt she had too much of it, and she needed help.

In any case, Martha doesn’t need a reprimand, she needs help!

**But even a troublesome text like this may lead us to ask a few important questions:**

**1 When we are distracted and overwhelmed by many things, how might we stop to see the bigger picture? To see the complementarity and interconnectedness of all things?**

Perhaps there is a gem of wisdom hidden in Jesus’ reply that Mary has chosen a good portion of the work. Martha is clearly eager to get lots of things done in a timely fashion. But she (and we) could benefit enormously from stepping back and seeing that others are using *their* gifts to respond to the situation at hand.

As a young man, I was a flurry of activity, racing through life at high speed, sometimes making hasty and careless decisions, eager to accomplish many and great things, and frustrated that more people were not getting on board with my agenda! Age has taught me to slow down, think things through carefully, be patient with myself and others knowing that everyone is doing the best they can. Everyone has chosen a good portion of the work, even if their works looks different from my own.

Yesterday, I was at the computer working on my sermon when the neighbor boy rang the doorbell. I first felt irritated and impatient with him. Then my higher-self (my wiser-self) said, “No Ken, practice what you preach! This is Imam’s way of contributing to the neighborhood. Give the boy a bit of your time. The sermon can wait.”

I loved one of Jeanne Moberly’s reflections this week from Mark Nepo’s Book of Awakening: “Sometimes, the best use of our will is to drop it all and just walk out from under everything that is covering us, even if only for an hour or so – just walk out from under the webs we’ve spun, the tasks we’ve assumed, the problems we must solve. They’ll be there when we get back, and maybe some of them will fall apart without our worry to hold them up.”

I would add that in those few moments of stepping out from under everything, I’m able to see that others are using *their* gifts to respond to the situation at hand. I’m not alone in the work.

When I first started as Associate Pastor 15.5 years ago, there was Sunday when the two other pastors were away at a retreat. I shared during the Welcome & Announcements “I’m on my own this morning.” Immediate, a long-time active member of the church stood to feet, pointed to me, and said emphatically, “Ken Pennings, at this church you are NEVER on your own!” I was a bit stunned. All I could think of was “Why would she call me out on this? Did I really deserve such a forceful and public reprimand?” Years later, I melt with gratitude thinking back on that moment. It wasn’t the reprimand that mattered. Rather the truth that she shared! Indeed, at ORUCC, we are NEVER on our own!” I share this story not to defend Luke’s Jesus in his reprimand of Martha, but to point out that we may be able to look past a forceful reprimand to affirm the importance, spirit, wisdom & truth of both the message and the messenger!

**2. Our text may lead us to ask a second question - How do we integrate both being & doing, faith & works, contemplation & action, relationships & productivity in our lives?**

At first glance, our text in Luke forces an **either/or**, but what if the spirit of the text is really a **both/and**?

It may seem as though Mary’s quiet contemplation is valued more highly than Martha’s many tasks, but this text may be a nod to the importance of both!

Faith and works can’t operate separately. What is the value of faith without works, or works without faith?

Perhaps Martha needed a gentle reminder that there is more to being the beloved community than getting things done. And it was probably a good thing for Mary to become aware of all Martha had on her plate so that she could offer a little support.

In Lauren Wright Pittman’s image “Mary & Martha,” Jesus equally affirms Mary and Martha’s lived-out faiths. He is green, the combination of Mary and Martha’s colors (yellow & blue), showing that he embodies the integration of both faith and works.

What might it look like to shift out of the ever-tempting mode of rivalry between the two sisters and imagine instead a healthy sibling relationship of both faith and works? Both women sharing a complementarity of gifts. Both women exercising both faith *and* works, in a mutually beneficial manner.

“Are you a Martha or a Mary?” is the wrong question and may lead us to an unhealthy imbalance in life. I love Parker Palmer’s book An Undivided Life, which helped me identify myself as a person of being & doing, faith & works, contemplation & action, relationships & productivity.

If there is a heated battle between the Martha and Mary within us, perhaps it’s time to make peace, and celebrate both the Martha and Mary within us.

Or as our Lenten devotional booklet urges, “How are we valuing both productivity and relationships, active faith and faithful actions?”

When John and I welcome guests in our home for dinner, he plans the menu, he polishes the silver, he irons the tablecloth and napkins, he prepares and serves the meal. But I have an important job as well. I’m inviting and welcoming the guests. I’m bringing people together through networking, bridge-building, and story-telling.

This is more than a division of labor. It’s sharing a complementarity of gifts. And it’s our way of integrating both faith and works, relationships and productivity.

And this is the dynamic at ORUCC - Each person sharing their individual gifts that complement the gifts of others! The both/and of faith and works is perhaps best lived out in the context of a community of people sharing complementary gifts!

**3. Our text may lead us to ask a third questions - How can we move away from traditional gender roles and stereotypes?**

One thing we know for sure, there were faithful and devoted women like Martha & Mary who were the backbone of the early Jesus movement. There were women who worked their fingers to the bone to ensure that the hungry were fed, the naked were clothed, and the stranger was welcomed. Some think that Martha and Mary might have been key leaders of a church that met in their home.

Scripture has plenty of examples of capable women exercising the full range of human gifts that enable the liberating and flourishing of communities. Nevertheless, some Jewish and Christian traditions still insist on the diminishing of women and their gifts.

I stepped away from Christianity for a brief time in my life but returned because of the way I saw Jesus challenging gender-bias and validating women!

A short text like the one before us today is another invitation to question and reject traditional notions of gender roles and stereotypes.

Call us woke, but we know for a fact that traditional gender stereotypes are harmful and dangerous. They can limit one's choices in careers, education, and personal life. They can perpetuate unequal treatment, discrimination, and reinforce power imbalances. They can lead to lowered self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy in those who don't fit societal expectations. Rigid gender roles and stereotypes continue to be used to justify violence against women and other oppressed groups.

In this congregation, we’re not always successful, but we try our best to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes, to avoid making assumptions based on gender. We critically evaluate media portrayals and advocate for policies and practices that promote equal opportunities and rights for all genders. We teach children about gender diversity, equity and inclusion.

And praise God, we hire a queer woman, a straight woman, and a gay man as our pastors!

**4. Our text may lead us to ask a fourth questions - What is *my* place of service within the Jesus movement?**

There are hints in the text that Jesus, Martha, & Mary enjoyed a close and trusting relationship. Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. Jesus appears to be the guest of honor and will undoubtedly delight in the elaborate meal that Martha would serve. Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and listens carefully to his teaching. This is quite a happy scene among dear friends, where feelings and frustrations can be shared, acknowledged, and worked through.

As he continued on his Journey to Jerusalem, Jesus stopped to enjoy the hospitality of his dear friends. As we continue on our Lenten Journey with Jesus, what gifts and talents will we use to provide hospitality and expand his movement of compassion and justice for the whole world?

We started Lent on Ash Wednesday with a reminder that the fasting that God prefers is “for us to bring the day of justice, for us to free those who are in chains, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to offer shelter to the homeless, to tend the sick and those in pain, to welcome the lonely, the lost and the least. Let this be our fast! Let this be our feast!