

“GREAT WOMEN OF THE BIBLE -- MARTHA”

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Lk. 10:38-42

As every parent knows, no two children are ever quite the same. As a matter of fact, sometimes there isn't any similarity between siblings. One of the real wonders of life, one of the mysteries which constantly amazes us, is how two or more children, having the same parents, environment, and heredity, can be utterly different from each other. Yet such is often the case.

A marvelous example of this is found in the story of Mary and Martha. It's hard to imagine two people so completely opposite in temperament and personality as were these two sisters. And Lazarus, their brother, was as unlike as either of *them* as January differs from July.

One commentator, with his tongue obviously stuck in his cheek, has suggested that,

“Martha is the Episcopalian of the family. Proper, orderly, devout, reading from her prayer book. While Mary is more like an unconventional Methodist. Zealous, impulsive, eager, praying whatever prayer springs to her lips from an overflowing heart. And to complete the picture, Lazarus, he says, is a Presbyterian. Staid, solid, silent, sound and philosophical.”

Apparently this biographer was not a Baptist. If he had been, he probably would have made Martha a Northern Baptist, Mary a Southern Baptist, and because so little is seen or heard from him and he needed to be raised from the dead, Lazarus would probably have wound up on the inactive roll!

At any rate, the characters in this story, particularly the two sisters, are classic examples of the individuality and uniqueness of personality which gives such zest and interest to life. It's not a case of one being right and the other being wrong. This would be an impoverished world if there were no Marys in it, and it would be an impossible world if there were no Marthas in it.

Each, in her own way, makes an important contribution to life. Neither can look with disdain upon the other. It is not Mary or Martha, but Mary and Martha who, together, make life the full orbed thing God intended it to be. Nor can we limit these two personality distinctions to the distaff side of life. We have Marys and Marthas among both sexes. These peptic and activistic types are found in men, too.

Hyper-thyroid Martha, never quiet for a minute, forever busy at doing something, is represent of all eager, industrious, active people, (both male and female) for whom to *serve* is to live.

Hypo-thyroid Mary, sitting quietly at the feet of Jesus, pensive and introspective, is representative of all gracious, gentle, contemplative people, (both male and female) for whom to *worship* is to live.

So let's not place one above the other. Each, in her own way, serves, and *both* worship! Both are friends of the master. Both love him. Both are loved by him. In their own unique and important way, *both* contribute to our understanding of what it means to be human.

Last week we directed our attention toward Mary and learned something of the importance of doing “the one thing needful.” Maintaining continual communion with Christ. This morning we turn to Martha, her older and more activistic sister, who, if we had such offices in our church, might be called the patron saint of homemakers. Her dedication to the duties of home, and her ceaseless services of devotion to others, are characteristic of those women who make the establishing of a home their major role in life.

Our first introduction to Martha comes during one of Jesus' frequent visits to her home in Bethany. This pleasant little village, just an hour's walk from Jerusalem, is a favorite stopping off place of our Lord. On this particular occasion, Martha, in the characteristic fashion of a worthy housewife, bustles about making sure his room is ready. Laying out dates and figs for him to munch on, while the fish and other foods for dinner are cooking. Mary, her younger, more mystical sister, sits quietly at Jesus' feet listening raptly to the quiet music of his flowing words.

Perhaps things do not go as Martha wants them to. Maybe the fire dies down at the wrong time. Or the milk turns sour at the last minute. At any rate, as Martha hurries from kitchen to dining room, to courtyard, to sleeping quarters, her gold embroidered tunic of fine linen swirling about, barely able to keep up with her many stops and starts, Martha becomes more and more irritated. Mary's seeming indifference to the responsibility of a hostess gets on her nerves. Finally, in a moment of exasperation, she vents her displeasure upon her sister by turning to Jesus and saying, “Lord, dost thou not care that my sister did leave me to serve alone?” (Lk. 10:40).

With that amazing insight which enabled him to understand why people are what they are and do what they do, Jesus rebukes Martha gently and seeks to help her see that, while she is doing the right thing, she is doing it in the wrong spirit, and this is bringing hurt to herself and to others.

“Martha, Martha,” he says, “you are anxious and troubled about many things . . .

But one thing is needful” (Lk. 10:41).

In essence he is saying she need not make such elaborate preparations just for him. He would much rather have a simple meal and the joy of her fellowship, then a banquet which necessitated her being too busy to spend time with him. In other words, Martha got off the trail by being more interested in *serving* Jesus, than *pleasing* Jesus.

Perhaps there's a lesson here for you ladies to learn. Many times wives and mothers give themselves so energetically to the task of keeping house, and doing many helpful things, by the end of the day they are so emotionally and physically spent from their arduous activity, they have little energy left for the one thing needful. Just being with their loved ones, for no other purpose than *being* with them.

I weigh my words carefully now. I'm sure no woman present will take what I'm about to say as an excuse for slovenliness at home, but there is a very real sense in which housework needs a bit of neglecting, now and then. By that I mean many homes would be happier if a few things didn't

get done sometimes, because mom took the time that might have been spent cleaning, or cooking, or washing, or gardening, and used it getting to know her family better. And, equally important, letting them get to know her, *as a person*, and not just a cook, or a seamstress, or a housekeeper.

In fact, all of us need to be aware of “the barrenness of a busy life,” lest we be distracted by much doing and lose sight of the real, lasting values which make life worth living. The same thing might be said of our relationship to our Lord. It’s possible, sometimes, to become so busy serving Jesus we never have time to fellowship with him.

One day a mother brought her little boy to a great man saying, “I want my boy to shake hands with you.” The boy thrust out his left hand. The man said, “Son, give me your right hand.” “I can’t,” replied the boy. “Why not?” inquired the man. “Because I have marbles in it.”

Sometimes you may wonder why God seems so far away. You may wonder why you can’t feel his presence and enjoy his fellowship. It may be because your hands are full of marbles. You may be so occupied with the mechanics *of* life, you have overlooked the spirit which ought to motivate you *in* life. You may unwittingly be more concerned with marbles, than you are concerned with God.

In saying all this, we need to be careful lest we turn Martha’s virtue into a fault. Her only failure, if we can even call it that, is that she exaggerated a virtue. She had a great talent for service and was anxious to serve her master well. We can understand that, can’t we? We can understand how, knowing Jesus was the messiah, she wanted to do her very best for him. What a privilege it must have been to have the Promised One of Israel at her table as her special guest! And while we commend Mary for being a good listener, we cannot help but wonder how long Jesus would have been satisfied to have Mary sitting at his feet, had not Martha been getting the table set and the dinner ready on the stove!

As George Elliot has one of the characters in his play, Scenes of Clerical Life, says,

“When a man comes in hungry and tired, piety won’t feed him, I reckon. Hard

carrots will lie heavy on his stomach, piety or no piety. It's right enough to be spiritual, I'm no enemy to that, but I like my potatoes mealy!"

And because Jesus was every inch of a man, I'm inclined to feel that when the hunger pains began gnawing away, he would have looked with great favor upon Martha's business. In fact, I'm sure one of the reasons he found this particular home a delightful place to visit, was the eagerness and joy with which Martha served him. Here he could count on food fit for a king. Here the locust and honey of leaner days in the desert were offset as Martha used her culinary arts for the sake of Christ.

The master's chiding of her was not because she was busy in service. He chided her, as sometimes we need to be chided, because of the spirit she expressed in doing what she did. His word to her was a gentle and loving reminder that equally important as the deed, is the attitude in which the deed is done.

This does not mean Martha was less “spiritual” than Mary. Not at all! As proof of that fact it is to Martha, not Mary, to whom Jesus first reveals himself to be “the resurrection and the life!”

This glorious unveiling comes shortly after the death of Lazarus

Like Mary, Martha is heartbroken at the loss of her brother. When she learns Jesus is approaching, she *runs* to meet him, still the activist, even in grief. But in the exchange which follows, she comes to know Christ, as she has never known him before. To see him as she has never seen him before.

Her testimony that Jesus is, “Christ, the son of God, even he that cometh into the world,” is one of the grandest statements of faith -- ever! It ranks side by side with Peter's historic confession at Caesarea Philippi. The wonder of it, the singular glory of it, the uniquely beautiful quality of it, is that this outburst of faith comes at a time of darkness, disappointment and despair.

Both Mary and Martha express the view, “If thou hadst been here, our brother would not have died.” But Martha says something Mary didn’t say. *She’s* the one who adds, “I know that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it to thee.”

There is nothing insensitive, or spiritually shallow, about Martha. We do her wrong when we relegate her to a lesser position than that of her sister. In her own way, and in her own time, Martha was every inch a woman after God’s own heart. Marge Paxson, who did much of the research I’ve drawn upon today, quotes from Daniel-Rops book, Jesus And His Times, when he says so eloquently,

“Martha received Christ into her home, so she was hospitable and gracious.

She often served him food, so she was gracious and faithful.

She was a good housekeeper, revealing her to be conscientious and dependable.

She made her house a home, thus proving herself to be loving, industrious and kind.

She accepted Christ as the Messiah, showing she was trusting and believing.

She had a deep affection for Jesus, and he had a great fondness for her, revealing her to be both loving and lovable”.

Could any woman, wife or mother be more? Is she not indeed a splendid example of what a woman ought to be? I believe so, and thus, as I said earlier, if we had such an office in the church, I would offer her to you this morning as the patron saint of mothers.

Be Yourself

There are several things I’d like to say, based on the life of Martha, and one of these is that in seeking to serve your master be yourself.

Conrad Thibault was one of the greatest Baritones America has ever produced. A few years ago, his name possessed a box office magic that filled every concert hall and auditorium in which he was scheduled to sing.

Mr. Thibault was not just a splendid singer, however, he was a magnificent Christian. Whenever he was away from home on Sunday, he would walk into the smallest church he could find and say to the minister, "I'm Conrad Thibault, I'd like to sing in your choir today, if you'll let me."

Sometimes the minister was so surprised he forgot about his sermon. Usually there was quite a flutter in the soprano section of the choir. But always the collection plates were heavier after the congregation heard Conrad Thibault sing, "The Lord's Prayer."

One day he stopped at Lynchburg, Virginia, for a concert and on Sunday offered to sing in the Fort Hill Methodist Church. They were trying to raise money to build a new sanctuary and Conrad offered to give a concert for the benefit of the building fund. In appreciation, the members of the church arranged a dinner for Mr. Thibault in the dining room of the church.

During the meal he noticed a wrinkled old lady serving the tables. On her face was the biggest smile he had ever seen. "Somebody ought to be waiting on her" he thought to himself. He turned to ask his dinner partner who she was, and why she was working so hard. "That's Mrs. Phlegar. She has charge of all our church dinners," the pastor said.

After dinner, Conrad slipped away from the crowd and found the little old lady busy over a steaming sink scrubbing the dishes and humming one of the songs he had sung during the evening. "That was a wonderful dinner," he said. "But why are you here in the kitchen?"

Mrs. Phlegar was a bit flustered at having the great baritone in her kitchen, but her eyes twinkled, as she smiled and began to wipe her hands on her apron.

"Well, Mr. Thibault, some folk can put lots of money in the collection plate. Some can preach great sermons. Some can sing beautiful songs. I do my work for God in the kitchen. It's all I know how to do. But as long as each of us gives the best we got, I guess that's all God expects."

She was right, you know. All God ever asks of anyone is that they be themselves, for his sake!

He doesn't expect everyone to be an opera star like Conrad Thibault. He doesn't expect everyone to be a great preacher like Peter Marshall. He doesn't expect everyone to be a worshiper like Mary, or a worker like Martha. He *does* expect, and hope, each of us will be ourselves, and will take whatever talent we possess, be it large or small, and use it for the Savior's sake.

I cannot choose. I should have liked so much
To sit at Jesus' feet, to feel the touch
Of his kind, gentle hand upon my head
While drinking in the gracious word he said.

And yet to serve Him! O divine employ,
To minister and give the Master joy,
To bathe in coolest springs his weary feet,
And wait upon Him while he sits at meat.

Worship or service, which? Ah, that is best
To which he calls *us*, be it toil or rest.
To labor for Him in life's busy stir,
Or seek his feet, a silent worshiper.

Let Others Do The Same

The second thing I want to say is that while being yourself, you must let others do the same. The reason Jesus rebuked Martha was not because she was forever busy in service. He chastened her because she wanted Mary to be just like her! She was not willing to let Mary express her love of Jesus in a way that was natural for Mary. She wanted Mary to be another Martha!

Jesus did not reprimand Martha for being busy about her domestic duties while Mary was lost in listening to what he had to say. But when Martha valued the silver of her service *for* the Lord more highly than the gold of Mary's gleaning *from* the Lord, Jesus had to enlighten her, and help

her understand service is not above worship! If anything, the reverse is true. But most certainly, *both* are necessary.

If you are a Martha-type, do not make light of Mary’s worship as if such sensitive souls are lazy and useless. If you are a Martha-type, be yourself, and let others do the same. The Kingdom of God needs both worship and service. It needs the full-orbed faith Mary *and* Martha can bring it together, and which neither can supply alone.

The next time we meet Martha it will be during a feast in her household in honor of the Savior. The disciples will have joined Jesus about her table, and once again, in characteristic fashion, Martha will serve.

Mary, in her unrestrained, unmeasured way of expressing love will, once again, leave the burden of domestic duties to her sister, and will anoint the feet of Jesus with precious oils and ointments.

But *this* time, there will be no word of criticism or complaint from Martha. She has learned her lesson. She now knows it’s enough for her to play her servant part in honoring her Master. While Mary does it *her* way, *Martha* shows love for him in the way she knows best: glad and willing service.

This suggests a third lesson.

Learn To Profit From Your Mistakes.

“We can say thanks to God for our mistakes, if we learn to profit from them.

If through our error we learn to mend our ways, and do better the second time than we did the first. For when that happens our weaknesses become strength, and our failings become foundations upon which to build a nobler finer life.”

God grant we shall learn, as Martha did, to express our love for Jesus in the fashion for which we are best fitted. That we shall be ourselves, and let others do the same, acknowledging that those who express their love in ways different from our own, do not love him any less than we do.

God grant we shall have the wisdom and grace to admit our mistakes, learn from them, so like Martha, we might be the kind of friends to whom Jesus is willing to reveal his greatest truths, and with whom he is prepared to share his profoundest secrets.

One of my most favorite poems, is by an author whose name I do not know. If you do, please let me know.

“Lord of all pots and pans and things,
Since I’ve no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things or
Watching late with thee,
Or dreaming in the twilight or
Storming heaven’s gates.
Make me a saint by getting meals or
Washing up the plates.

Although I must have Martha’s hands,
I have Mary’s mind, and.
When I black the boots and shoes
Thy sandals, Lord, I find.
I think of how they trod the earth
What time I scrub the floor,
Accept this meditation, Lord,
I haven’t time for more.

Warm all the kitchen with thy love,
And light it with thy peace,
Forgive me all my worrying

And make all grumbling cease.
Thou who didst love to give men food
In room or by the sea
Accept this service that I do
I do it unto thee.”

Be yourself -- for Jesus' sake!