

July 21, Ordinary 16C (Luke 10:38-42)

## **This is one of those stories that provokes howls of rage.**

by [Kristin Berkey-Abbott](#) in the [July 3, 2019](#) issue

There are not all that many named women in the Gospels. If asked to come up with a list, we might start with Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene; before long we would get to Mary and Martha, the subjects of this week's reading from Luke. This is one of those stories that provokes howls of rage from some readers. Like the parable of the prodigal son, it can trip our "That's not fair!" switch. It's easy to see how the good Samaritan can be the model for our behavior. The Mary and Martha story prickles us more.

Many of us women were raised to be like Martha. I have a friend who won't even let herself exercise until her household chores are done, so ingrained is the idea of "work first, play later." Others don't let themselves play in any context. How sad is it that we don't see play as its own reward, as worthy of our attention as the chores?

Think about the last time that someone visited your home. Perhaps you spent the days or even weeks before their arrival getting ready: cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, doing laundry, restoring order. Sometimes the process of getting ready for the arrival of guests can leave us too exhausted to enjoy their visit.

That's the story we see in Luke. Martha scurries around so much that she can't be present for Jesus. How often are our lives similar? We often get so consumed by the chores of daily life that we neglect to notice the sacred in our midst. Though this story revolves around women, men are not exempt from this paradigm. All humans must wrestle with the question of how to balance the chores that are necessary to sustain life with the spiritual nourishment that we need so desperately.

Unfortunately, often the chores win.

By now I can hear some responding, "Yes, but those chores must be done!" Really? Are you sure? What would happen if you didn't vacuum this week? What would

happen if you wore your clothes an extra time or two before washing them? What would happen if you surrendered to the dust?

We also have additional distractions that Martha didn't have. We now have phones that feel smarter than we are, phones designed to make sure we're constantly checking them. We're so afraid of missing something important in our online lives that we are in danger of missing out completely in our face-to-face relationships. We're not usually making connections with humans when we engage with our phones. We're mostly checking the latest headlines, or doing some online shopping, or just about anything to avoid paying attention to whatever makes us worried or frightened.

In Martha's defense, she does have a visitor. Perhaps this makes her behavior different, a bit more amplified than usual. She's likely making special efforts so that her guest feels welcome. The ancient world had expectations and rituals around hospitality that were much more rigid than anything most 21st-century Americans experience.

But when Jesus tells Martha that she worries about many things, the implication is that all of the issues that cause her anxiety aren't ultimately very important. It's a story that we, with our increasingly hectic lives, need to hear again—maybe every day.

We need to be reminded to stay alert. Busyness is a drug that dulls the senses. Charging through our to-do lists can be a way of quelling the anxiety. But in our busyness, we forget what's really important. We forget to focus on Christ and living the way he commanded us.

Notice that Jesus never focuses on household chores. He doesn't say, "Blessed are those who keep a clean house, for they have already possessed the kingdom of God." He is not responsible for the saying "Cleanliness is next to godliness." And whatever the customs of hospitality Martha is adhering to, Jesus spends much of his ministry reminding people that social expectations can keep us from what is most important: our relationships with God and others. All those chores keep us away from our earthly relationships. Jesus calls on us to care for the poor and the dispossessed, not for the dusty objects that clutter our houses.

God will not appear with white gloves on to assess our spiritual progress by way of household upkeep. The assessment of our spiritual progress will focus on much more

serious issues than those.

Jesus reminds Martha that Mary has chosen what's important: listening to God. Through his ministry, again and again, Jesus teaches us of the marvelous transformations that can happen when we give attention to God, instead of to the thousands of distractions that society offers us.