

Martha, the Samaritan, and hospitality

The First Sunday of Lent

Robb McCoy

If you turn to the Scripture and read today's passage (which I genuinely hope you do), there could be a tendency to quickly realize, "This is the Good Samaritan story, I know this one." Indeed, this is one of Jesus' most famous stories. Even the term - Good Samaritan - has transcended church culture and entered the general lexicon. A "Good Samaritan" is now synonymous with those who offer help to people in need. It would be easy to finish that part of the story and think you're done with today's reading, but surprise! We are going all the way to verse 42, which means we also are including the story of Mary and Martha.

This is one of the most relatable stories in the gospels. Two sisters, one is upset about the other not carrying her weight with the chores. It is a deeply relatable, but on the surface unrelated story.

The glue that holds these stories together, however, is hospitality. In that way, I believe Martha and the Samaritan should inform each other.

It is easy to read Mary and Martha and think that Martha's was rebuked for failing to sit and learn at Jesus' feet. This can be a belittling response to Martha for trying to come to the aid of Jesus and his entourage.

This interpretation however, makes no sense, especially in light of the story that Jesus just told. Hospitality comes from the deep Christian value of mercy. Mercy is love enacted, and it a core part of following Christ. Hospitality, mercy, and service are all intrinsically related. Our word for service in the Bible comes from the same Greek word that gives us the term "Deacon."

This passage could be retitled, "The Two Deacons." Martha was not doing anything wrong in serving others. What she missed however, is that it was not her job to pull Mary away from learning. If anything, Jesus was opening up a world of possibilities for Martha, who could be a deacon, but could also be a student.

Just as Martha and the Samaritan can be held in parallel, Mary and the law expert can be shown contrasting each other. Mary, the student, was sitting at Jesus feet. The law

"The Good Samaritan" by Rembrandt (1606-1669) oil on panel

This image is a part of the wikimedia commons



expert, on the other hand, was trying to trap Jesus. These are two very different postures. There were two students, but only one understood the assignment.

The two deacons were also important. Martha's service is not rebuked. She is simply encouraged to see what Mary needed, too.

Service is an integral part of following Jesus, as is sitting down to listen to Christ teach. This Lenten season, we can be encouraged to do both. More importantly, we should be encouraged to discern what "the better part" is right now.

Lent is a time for repentance, reflection, and renewal. To do this properly, we must spend time focusing on what "the better part" might be for you. You may need to serve. You may need to study. You may need more time in prayer. You may need more time alone. You may need some time to rage, march, and protest.

None of these things are ever "the better part" always. Martha was in a panic over what she needed to do. And many of us can relate with this sense of overwhelming need. Our to-do lists, anxieties, and lists of things to keep us up at night may be growing faster than we can handle.

Hear Jesus say your name. You - you right here, you need to focus this Lenten season on what will bring peace to your life, and choose the better part.