

### Everyone's Invited in the Kingdom

Dearly as I love him, every once in a great while Jesus says or does something in the Scriptures that makes me want to gently slap him upside the head. Take today's Gospel. Martha has generously invited Jesus and the disciples into her home. Suddenly, she has to serve dinner to at least thirteen guests and, because one of those guests just happens to be the Messiah, it has to be the finest feast she can pull together. It would bring eternal shame on the family to offer anything less. There's so much to do, and where is her darling little sister? Plopped down at the Master's feet, hanging on his every word instead of in the kitchen peeling vegetables where Martha needs her to be. Martha is frustrated enough to politely ask Jesus for help. And what's his reply? "Martha, Martha, Martha." Brady Bunch references aside, it's hardly the compassionate response we might expect from the Son of God. Preachers have used this passage ever since to create a good sister/bad sister dynamic between Martha and Mary. Mary is the good sister, who chooses the better part of listening adoringly to the Messiah despite her worldly responsibilities. But Martha? Busy, frazzled, harried Martha allows the burdens of *her* worldly responsibilities to overwhelm her instead of listening to her Lord. Of course, her worldly responsibilities only exist because Martha is doing her utmost to serve that same Lord, but let's not let that detail interfere with our condemnation of her spiritual folly. Oh Martha, Martha, Martha.

Before jumping too quickly onto the "good Mary, bad Martha" bandwagon, however, we need to take a second look. Scripture is rarely that cut and dried, and Jesus is almost never as supercilious as the traditional reading makes him out to be. He's not a hypocrite, either. Having just told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, why would Jesus turn around and chastise a follower who is literally running herself ragged to offer him the most gracious hospitality she can manage? My sense is that he wouldn't, so what's really going on here?

Let's examine this passage in the context of our reading from Genesis. Adonai and two of his angels have dropped by to visit Abraham on their way to obliterate Sodom and Gomorrah. (Medieval rabbi Rashi charmingly suggests that the Lord wants to make sure that Abraham has recovered from his recent circumcision.) Abraham may realize that his unexpected visitors are supernatural but, for argument's sake, let's presume that he doesn't. He modestly offers them water and a little bread, then hastily assembles a feast that would generously serve ten times as many guests. He slaughters a whole calf, adds a side of dairy, and orders his wife Sarah to knead up enough dough to make thirty loaves of bread. And Sarah's reward? She's left behind in the tent, struggling to complete an absurd amount of work while Abraham entertains the Lord.

The bounty that Abraham offers to three strangers illustrates the Hebrew community's standards for hospitality in Jesus's time. Imagine the social pressure that Martha must have felt, welcoming the savior of Israel and his twelve closest friends into her home. A little water and bread wouldn't cut it. No wonder she wanted Mary's help as she scrambled to meet the moment.

Writing this sermon, I caught myself making certain assumptions about Martha and Mary. I imagined Martha as the capable older sister who managed the household while little sister Mary, probably the baby of the family, routinely skipped out on her chores to focus on more amusing pursuits like basking in the presence of their famous guest. Although Luke doesn't mention their brother, we can assume that these sisters are the same Martha and Mary who appear with Lazarus in John's Gospel. But picturing Martha as hyper-responsible and Mary as a flighty dreamer may get them all wrong. Perhaps Mary is the eldest, and Martha is so accustomed to working under her older sister's guidance that she can't cope when Mary drops everything to sit at Jesus's feet. Or perhaps Martha is upset because she, too, would like to sit

and listen to Jesus, but she knows there's too much to do unless she can get some help. Dinner for more than a dozen people isn't going to cook itself.

Luke doesn't often tell us what happens after Jesus has an important conversation. Without knowing what he said next, this passage is problematic, especially for modern audiences. I'm a great fan of *The Chosen*, an internationally acclaimed television series that presents the Gospels in a relatable way. When *The Chosen* presented this moment, Jesus went on to tell his disciples that they all needed to help Martha get dinner on the table. If Jesus said that, though, Luke didn't write it down. So, with only Luke's text before us, what is Jesus doing in this passage and what can we discern from his actions about the kingdom of God?

Candidly, I'm more than a bit of a Martha myself. Before Covid, our family did a lot of amateur theatre, and we often hosted cast parties. Inevitably, I'd spend the first two or even three hours bustling between the kitchen and the buffet table, serving and refilling dishes, making sure everyone had what they needed, and removing empty plates and glasses. On a good night, I'd grab something to eat around 10:00 PM. Having grown up with a mother who was more Martha Stewart than the Domestic Diva herself, I took for granted that that was what a hostess did. So, when one of my personal saints, Barefoot Contessa Ina Garten, mentioned on her show that there's no need to prepare every last item oneself when hosting a dinner party, it landed like a revelatory thunderbolt from heaven. The first time I followed her advice and served a bakery dessert, I waited anxiously for my guests to complain. You know what? They didn't, and it was the first time I was ever able to relax and enjoy one of my own parties.

Perhaps I'm just listening for what I want to hear, but I'd love to believe that Jesus isn't chastising Martha. Perhaps he's inviting her to take a seat next to Mary and trust that dinner will come together. He is, after all, the God who fed thousands with a few loaves of bread and a

couple of fish. He's certainly capable of making sure that everyone in the house gets fed. Perhaps he's also lovingly suggesting that Martha's dinner doesn't have to be so elaborate. Jesus and the disciples are accustomed to eating whatever they can pick up on the road. Only a few verses back, he told his seventy emissaries to eat whatever was put in front of them. Jesus enjoyed a good meal, but good food doesn't have to be fancy. As Saint Ina taught me, the best part of dinner isn't what's on the plate. It's the people you share it with that make it a feast.

We shouldn't call Martha misguided, because she was acting in accordance with the social customs of her community. She was also serving others, a key Kingdom function. If Mary represents the contemplative life, Martha represents the life of service. That Mary's choice is better doesn't make Martha's choice bad. Still, Martha might inspire us to wonder why we put so much store in social expectations. In an era when whole cable networks are dedicated to food and interior design and internet influencers create the false impression that it's even possible to live a perfectly curated life, there's a lot of pressure to meet unachievable standards. That's not just in the realm of hospitality. Contemporary life is crammed with demands for more: more productivity, more perfection, more creativity, bigger, better, faster, fancier results. But if we let those pressures drive ourselves to the point where we're too busy and worn out to listen for the voice of God, we've left the Kingdom behind no matter how good our intentions might be.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, we are all invited to sit in the presence of our God and allow him to speak into our hearts. No one gets left behind in the kitchen. To the extent that we impose impossible standards on ourselves and each other, we need to stop. This isn't a matter of choosing between being Martha or Mary or, worse, pitting Mary and Martha against one another. It's a matter of making sure that everyone is free to accept our Lord's invitation to sit, rest and listen. We can trust Jesus to help us, and everything that needs doing will get done. Amen.