

## The Better Portion

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Amy Courts, in a recent post on Facebook,<sup>1</sup> told of speaking at a women's retreat. She wrote, "When I was told the weekend's passage was about Mary and Martha, I visibly cringed and asked, "Are you serious. Another women's retreat concentrating on this story of the 'distracted busy body Martha who needs to be more like her sweet sister Mary who's always sitting at Jesus' feet'? Gag.

"I am an enneagram 4 [that's a personality type typified as 'individualist and romantic'. Emotionally honest, creative, and personal, Fours also can be moody and self-conscious. Their fear is having no significance; their basic desire is be uniquely themselves; their vice is envy.] Anyway, she writes: "I am an enneagram 4 and the youngest of four sisters. I need exactly no one telling me to be more like my sisters, sorry not sorry."

She decided if she's going to be a preacher, she'd have to preach some texts she didn't like, and might as well practice with women who love her. She dug in, determined to find something new and powerful about Mary and Martha, and what she shared sent me to every resource I could find. I'm still absorbing what I found, which is that what we've been handed (especially for women) is full of patriarchal projections that strip two powerful sisters of their validity. Here is the story:

<p>LUKE 10:38-42 NRSV <i>"Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup>But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked,</i></p>	<p><i>"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."<sup>41</sup>But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."</i></p>
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Here is one of the clearest examples of how familiarity with a text may be a problem. We read the text and hear what we expect—not necessarily what's there. Right off the bat, two things are clear in the opening two verses: first, Martha received Jesus alone. I've always assumed that there were others in the house; but the text doesn't mention anyone else being in the house—not even Mary! It says, "Martha had a sister named Mary."

Second, both Martha and Mary were disciples. Most English translations, including our NRSV, omit the word, also, which is clearly present in the Greek—"She had a sister named Mary, who also sat at the Lord's feet..." That word, also, indicates that Mary and Martha "sat at the Lord's feet". That's a common reference to discipleship. Both these sisters were disciples of Jesus—Martha at home in Bethany; Mary... maybe traveling the countryside with Jesus and the other disciples.

As we continue to read, we see that they were active in their discipleship—deeply involved in ministry. We know that from verse 40 (and I'm going to use some Greek here): "But Martha was constantly persipao concerning much diakonian."

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10156970861163353&set=a.105912683352&type=3&theater>

Most translations, including our NRSV, translate "perispao" "distracted," but its root meaning is "greatly troubled"—relentless, ongoing stress. That word connects this story with this series of sermons addressing a spirit of fear that grips our country. That spirit has many manifestations, but my specific focus is embodied in a culture of obsessive, compulsive overachieving that leaves people stressed out, burned out, worn out, feeling trapped, and despairing of free, unburdened life. That condition has been my pastoral focus for these sermons based on II TIMOTHY 1:7 "For God did not give us a spirit of fear (cowardice), but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

So, Martha is perpetually stressed out by burdens directly related to dia-konian. Our English word, "deacon" comes from that word. It almost always is translated "ministry" or "service"—the noun form is, simply "servant." In most English translations, apostles, disciples, pastors, prophets, all men, do "ministry". But here, for some reason Martha does "tasks." Same word.

I looked it up in 20 English versions, and in all but one the clear implication is that Martha is in the kitchen preparing a big meal; yet the text makes no reference to anyone in the house other than Jesus and Martha. Isn't that interesting?

Martha, a disciple of Jesus, is overwhelmed, and in her state of "persipao", she ephistemi. She "confronted" or "attacked" Jesus, saying, "Lord! Does it not make you anxious that my sister has katalipo alone to diakonein?"

"Katalipo" means "to leave"—to go away, to physically abandon or desert a place. Mary is not present. And she has left Martha alone to diakonein.

So while Mary is gone, Martha is "doing ministry": making meals for the community, getting groceries for the poor, praying with people, visiting prisoners, taking care of kids, doing all those daily labors of ministry.

She is the community organizer who doesn't sleep because police violence doesn't sleep.

She is the church mother taking in and feeding kids after finding their mom an outfit to wear to a job interview and making sure she has a ride and a few copies of her resume.

She is the pastor taking meals to the home-bound; preaching at house church every Sunday and making sure someone is there to greet Jesus when he comes to town.

She is a woman in a man's world doing "mens' work" and is close enough with Jesus to speak freely and plainly to him when she needs answers. And she's tired.

So, she tells Jesus to go find Mary and "epo"—command—her to come home and help. This is where it gets kind of amazing. Here is Jesus' response: "Martha, Martha. You are merimnas and thorybaze about pollos."

She is tired and overworked. But Jesus peels back that layer and names the truth: Martha is merimnas—anxious to the point of being torn into pieces—and thorybaze—agitated to the point of panic—about pollos—many things.

Martha has confronted Jesus and told him to command Mary back home. Instead he names Martha—twice—calling her out of the Mary narrative back into her own story. He names the stresses and anxieties that are tearing her apart—the fear and panic she's tried to bury in the busyness of ministry.

And he tells her, "What Mary has chosen is a good portion, and it will not be taken from her."

This is where that myth of Mary physically sitting at the feet of Jesus becomes problematic. Sitting at Jesus' feet meant she is a disciple: a woman out doing a disciple's work with men in a world not made for or kind to women. It is her absence, not her laziness, that has Martha agitated. Martha loves her sister and is anxious to the point of being torn apart by her absence. I think she wants her sister home safe.

But Jesus says not to worry about Mary, because Mary has chosen a "good portion"—she's well-suited to the ministry she's doing and can take care of herself.

Two critical things happen here. First: Jesus calls Martha back to her own self-identity, her own ministry, her own heart. He validates her as she is.

And second: He 100% is not telling Martha to be more like Mary. He is telling Martha, "You be Martha, and let Mary be Mary."

I don't know if I'm finished with this series on fear. Here is what I've tried to offer to date:

Acknowledge the fear. Ours is a culture of denial and avoidance. Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* magazine wrote, "Fear is a universal human experience. It's not wrong; it's natural. In fact, we are wired biologically to fear things that could harm us. It is our response to fear that becomes a matter of faith."<sup>2</sup>

Focus on spiritual health. Musicians practice regularly; athletes work out regularly; and people of faith practice the spiritual disciplines regularly, or they succumb to that spirit of fear that does not come from God. Spend time in the spiritual gym: spend time in study and prayer and meditation.

Avoid isolation. Christianity is personal; but it's not all private. We need the nurture and fellowship of others who share our vision of faithfulness. We need mutual support and encouragement in the use of our gifts of ministry. And we need the sense of caring and love expressed in the bearing of each other's burdens and the celebration of each other's joys. Don't be a spiritual "Lone Ranger."

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<sup>2</sup> Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis*. HarperOne. Kindle Edition, Location 2005.

You be you; and let Mary be Mary. Don't compare yourself to anyone else. Don't try to duplicate what some other Christian is doing. Each Christian is called and is gifted to fulfill his or her own calling.

"The issue is never just the fear. It's living in the spirit of fear that's like living in a spiritual prison." Fear can be immobilizing. But it can be overcome.

Dr. Karl Menninger was answering questions after a lecture when a man asked, "What would you advise someone to do if he felt a nervous breakdown coming on?" Most people expected the doctor to say, "Consult a psychiatrist." Instead he said, "Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need, and do something to help that person."

Prayer Slide