

July 18, 2010  
Year C  
Mary & Martha

**My name is Martha.** I have been accused by some of being bossy, argumentative, and aggressive. But what I have been, I have had to be. I am a woman trying to make it in a man's world. There are those who belittle me because of the kind of work which I do best, and enjoy doing. This work is often considered worthless. But I like cooking, cleaning, mending, washing, marketing, and all the other tasks that go into making our home comfortable for the weary. And I don't mind saying that it takes an inordinate amount of organization, foresight, and stamina to run a household smoothly – more than the average person has, if I must say so myself.

Imagine Jesus as a guest at your home, and perhaps you will understand why I was so anxious to make sure everything was perfect. Oh, I will admit that my temper got the best of me and I probably spoke too harshly. But imagine what it's like to be saddled with twelve extra mouths to feed! Of course, any woman worth her weight in salt can prepare a meal for four. And four was all I was expecting: The stranger, Jesus; my brother, Lazarus, Mary; and myself. But my brother failed to mention that wherever the Galilean Stranger went, his twelve disciples were sure to follow.

I ended up having to figure out how to make a chicken only large enough to feed six, stretch to feed sixteen. Not to mention the fact that more cucumbers, beans, lentils, onions, leeks, vegetable marrow, and garlic had to be chopped up. As I scurried from pot to pot, from broth to bread, trying to keep the breeze outside from extinguishing the fire in the oven, worrying whether there was enough water and who would go down to the well to fetch more, I found myself growing increasingly annoyed at my younger sister, Mary, for leaving me to worry and serve alone. There was so much to do, so many to do it for, and so little time to do it. As usual, Mary was engrossed with the conversations of the men. She had even forgotten to offer our travel-weary guests the opportunity to wash their hands and feet after a day's journey.

From my cooking area I could see into the front room where everyone was gathered. The twelve sat in a corner with my brother, Lazarus, talking among themselves. From time to time they would look over in the direction of Mary and Jesus. There Mary sat at Jesus' feet, gazing intently up into his face,

looking as though her life depended on his word, oblivious to the dirt and grime on his feet. He sat before her speaking with intense energy, as if his own life depended on getting out what he held inside.

The two of them, Jesus and my sister, were only a few feet away from me, but they looked as if they were miles away from my broth and lentils.

Like I said before, everyone tends to underestimate the amount of labor and talent it takes to coordinate shopping, preparing meals, cleaning, tending to ill family members, and doing it all within a tight family budget. If I'd been born a man instead of a woman, I could have been one of the twelve disciples who followed the Galilean and could have done a good job – if not better – then any of them in attending to the details of setting up arrangements, arranging for meals, securing lodging, and doing a host of other tasks that go into keeping a religious organization running smoothly. At least under my care, Jesus wouldn't have had to sleep on boats and on mountains.

But I was not born a man. I was born a woman.

And despite the fact that people only mention my name in the shadow of my sister and brother who are better known than I am, I have done the best I could to carve out a niche for myself. Even if that niche is doing the work – the spadework of domesticity – that no one else wants to do. But the truth is, I am just one of many women who, because of what we do, keep movements and homes together. I will grant you that I am sometimes a bit tactless and short-tempered. And if this is true, it is because that I have found some people think they can climb on your back anytime they want just because you make your living on your knees.

That's the way my sister, Mary, acts toward me sometimes. People like her think because you're always busy doing housework – every time they see you, your hands are in a batch of dough, or there is soot on your nose, or you smell like onions and garlic – you don't have a mind. Well, I do have a mind; and I do pray and mediate. Not as much as I'd like, but more than some people think. It's just that people like me have had to learn to talk to God with a broom in our hands. If we don't make the sacrifices that it takes to keep the home going, who's going to do it? Certainly not Mary!

Mary has always had a gift for making people feel important. No matter how boring their conversation, no matter how impractical their assertions, Mary has a gift for making people think they have something valuable to say. She

lends them her ears and her heart; she gives them her undivided attention and sympathy. It's a rare gift of concentration I've never understood.

I, on the other hand, look perpetually distracted. I suppose the only way I know how to express my love and concern is by cleaning and fussing, for I have never known the luxury of self-contemplation. Mary, by contrast, is quiet, sensitive, and at times given to unusual outbursts of affection. Take for example, the time she stunned everyone by anointing Jesus' feet with expensive oil and then wiping his feet with her hair. Only a slave does such a thing! I was aghast! yet, admittedly, her sensitivity and humility touched even my heart.

Humility...do you suppose that is what I lack? I serve, but without humility. My sister is humble, though she forgets to offer you water.

That afternoon when Jesus was a guest in our home changed my life. And like most worthwhile change, it came about as a result of pain. I had the best of intentions; vexing Jesus was the last thing I wanted to do. I had been so anxious that everything go smoothly, anxious that our guests enjoy the meal that I'd been preparing for more than three days, anxious that Jesus be impressed with all that I had done for him, that I resented the way Mary was consuming his attention with so little effort on her part. It was as if everything I stood for was being held up for public ridicule. Before I knew it, my irritation with my sister got the best of me.

*Jesus, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?  
Tell her to help me.*

Silence fell over the room. The disciples looked up from their conversations. My brother, Lazarus, gazed at me in horror. Admittedly, my complaint might have sounded petty and selfish, but in the end, not one of them denied being hungry.

Jesus had only to look at me with those eyes that seemed to bore right through me, and I felt anger melt to shame. I knew right then that there had never been a time that evening when he had not noticed me.

*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worked up over many things. But only one thing is important. Mary has chosen the good part which will not be taken from her.*

Jesus' rebuff stung me, and the look of disappointment on his face sent a chill down my spine. It was not that he did not appreciate the effort and care that went into coordinating a meal, or the added burden of preparing for unexpected guests. He understood my frustration. No, it was not my housework that Jesus took exception to; it was my attitude. There is a difference between serving and ministering.

I now understand what Jesus was saying to me. I know also what he was not saying. Jesus was not denigrating the value of my work over against Mary's attentiveness. But in spite of all the sweat and energy that I poured into my service to my guests, my disposition threatened to cancel out all the love that went into my efforts. And there was more.

My sister and I are different, and there is no way of changing that fact. Nor is there reason to apologize: we are women who have a right to our differences. Nevertheless, we are sisters. And as my sister's sister, I had no right to attack her publicly, certainly not in a room full of men. I should have taken her aside to express my frustrations – woman to woman. And if she had refused to help me perhaps then I would have had grounds to complain to Jesus. In truth my sister has never been interested in housework. Why did I expect that evening to be any different? Who was I angry at? Mary, for not helping me? Jesus, for appearing not to notice me? Or everyone, for expecting me to serve them?

Still, perhaps it was unfair to ask Mary to give what she had no talent for doing. I'm really not sure about that, but I do know I had no right to humiliate my sister before a crowd of people. I wanted to hurt her just as she had hurt me by leaving me alone to serve. In the end both of us were wrong: Mary, for taking me for granted; and I, for not going to her personally to voice my feelings. How easy it is for sisters to become alienated from one another.

**My name is Mary.** And for as long as I can remember, my sister, Martha, and I have always been different. We talk differently. We behave differently. We see the world differently. I suppose we dream different dreams.

But, then I am different from most of the Jewish women I know in Bethany.

Ever since I was a little girl, I've never wanted to do anything other than read, write, and study. "But such things are not permitted Jewish girls, Mother would say, "so finish peeling your onion." How I would envy my brother, Lazarus, as he'd leave home every morning for his Torah lessons with the local rabbi. How I would envy the way he and Father would stay up evenings arguing the Law, reciting Scripture, and exchanging insights about things that were sealed away as forbidden mysteries to me.

Perhaps if I were more like Martha, it would not hurt so much to have been born female.

My sister has always been quick to speak her mind and the first to take the initiative. She was Father's favorite... although one would normally expect such qualities in a girl to have been insufferable to a traditional Jewish male like our father. One thing saved my older sister, despite her impulsive, brash outbursts: my father's oldest daughter was always willing to serve and give herself to others. For this, my father, as most Jewish men would, loved my sister, Martha.

It isn't that I refuse to serve, but that I prefer to listen. I suppose I'm the curious type. By listening in on my father's conversations with the men who dropped by our house to fellowship around fish and wine. I learned about current events: the political intrigues in Herod's courts, the disputes between the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Sannhedrin Council, the terrorism of the Zealots, and the death of one John the Baptist. Had I been born male, I would have been a philosopher. But I was born a female. And because I am a woman instead of a man I am called a daydreamer.

New ideas, exciting discoveries, a lively debate, and other people's conversations – these are the matters that captivate me. Which is probably why my brother invited the teacher from Galilee to our home that afternoon. Lazarus knew that the love in Martha's heart was in the good she did with her hands, while my heart was in my mind.

I had heard rumors about the thin, dark rabbi from Galilee. Some called him a lunatic. Others thought he was a charlatan. Most believed he suffered from self-delusion. It was rumored that he was a miracle worker, a man of immense power. He was not the political power of King Herod, nor the religious power of the High Priest Caiphas. His was an unusual power that comforted rather than threatened. They said he healed the lame, restored sight to the blind, and gave sanity back to the insane. The most persistent rumor of all was that he was a “ladies’ man.” On many occasions he had been seen talking with women in public. Harlots, adulteresses, and Samaritan women followed him from town to town. Mothers sought him to heal their children, and little girls thought of him as their friend. Such things were unheard of for a respectful Jewish man.

Many people gave everything they had simply to hear him preach. And I know why: when I heard him speak, something inside of me fell on its face.

Of course, my brother told me of the wisdom of Jesus’ deceptively simple stories: the parable of the prodigal son, the shepherd who left his flock to search for the one lost sheep, and the parable of the mustard seed.

But these were not the parables Jesus recounted to me when he was a guest in our home. Instead as I sat at his feet, he compared God to a woman who loses a coin, searches relentlessly for it, and invites her friends to join her in celebration when she finds it. He recounted the parable of the poor widow who gave her last coin to the temple. He told me the parable of the wise and foolish virgins who grew weary with their oil lamps waiting for the bridegroom. My favorite of all was the parable about the widow who wouldn’t take “no” for an answer, even from an impious judge. To me, Jesus spoke of women, righteousness and God.

It was as though he was saying to me, “Mary, the kingdom of God belongs to you, a woman too,” It was as though the most important thing to Jesus right then was that I, a woman, understand him. His words held me spellbound.

That was until I heard my sister’s voice. It was a familiar sound, crackling with irritation:

*Jesus, don’t you care that my sister has left me by myself to serve? Tell her, then, to help me.*

If I told you I was displeased when I heard Jesus defend my right to learn, I would be less than honest. In fact, I was more than a bit smug. At last I'd met someone who didn't think I was a freak; someone who didn't think my wanting to learn was unfeminine; someone who believed that my curiosity was more than normal, it was commendable.

*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worked up over very many things. But only one thing is important. Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken from her.*

Imagine: Centuries of women's intellectual suppression was toppling before my eyes. But the pained expression on my sister's face soon turned my glee to remorse. Martha was not challenging my right to learn. She was simply challenging my right to do so at her expense. Nor was Jesus defending my learning at my sister's expense/ Actually, it was the way he looked from my sister, standing in the door of the cooking area hurt and embarrassed, to me sitting at his feet uncomfortable and silent, that made me bow my head in shame. It was as though he was waiting for us to talk to one another, rather than talk to him about one another.

Yes, my sister, Martha, and I are as different as night is from day. And there are many things about which we don't, and probably never will, agree. But Martha is my sister. And she has the right to be supported, too. When I am honest, I have to admit that Martha has always supported me by doing the work around the house which I have always been too preoccupied, too lazy, or too absentminded to do.

That afternoon in our home as our family entertained Jesus and the twelve disciples, when I did not offer to help my sister in the endless tasks that were before her, I was guilty of exploiting her talents. The truth is, it was because my sister worked as hard as she did shopping, cleaning, and cooking that I was free to lounge undisturbed at Jesus' feet and contemplate. Never once did I to ask Martha whether she wanted to join the conversation, or whether there was anything I could do to help her so the two of us could learn together from Jesus.

We women must pool our resources, our gifts, our energies, so that each of us has the opportunity to grow. Sometimes it means making the sacrifice of doing what we are ill-suited to do, like house-cleaning, so that another

woman, the one who usually does the house-cleaning might be free to experience something different.

What good is it if I grow and my sister Martha, doesn't?

Yes, I might have been justified in my search for knowledge. But I was wrong to use my sister to get what I wanted. I should have gone to Martha and offered the few domestic skills I have so that she could have been free to join us. Or, I should have talked to the men in the room into doing what I am told they do often – go without food. That way all of us would have been free of the distraction of cooking and serving. All of us could have shared in the learning together.

That is what I should have done. How easy it is to think of what we should have done differently once we've already hurt the ones we love the most. And now, I must go to my sister and ask her to forgive me.

From "Just A Sister Away" by Renita J. Weems