

She's right, you know. Martha is totally in the right here. She has justice in her corner: it's not fair that she has to do all the serving by herself, while her sister—and everybody else—just sits there listening to Jesus.

Martha has the *gospel* on her side, too, especially in Luke, where the whole of the gospel might be summed up in just one word: HOSPITALITY!

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (9:58) Yet everywhere he was, and is, Jesus was, and is, both host and guest.

Hospitality is what Jesus and his followers are looking for as they make their way to Jerusalem.

Hospitality, given or received, is the measure of people's response to Jesus.

Hospitality is what the Samaritan in Jesus' parable provided to the traveler who was beaten, robbed and left half-dead by the side of the road.

Jesus himself is the model of hospitality: “For who is greater,” he will ask the disciples in Jerusalem,” the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” (22:27)

*Hospitality* is what Martha is bent on providing.

There's something going on here that makes us really uneasy. It could be the fact that Martha challenges Jesus, chides him. He, in turn, certainly seems to put her down.

It could be that Martha, who starts out feeling indignant (from L. *in dignus*, feeling her worth not recognized ), ends up worse off still, feeling shamed.

The way Jesus' words to Martha have been used against women by the Church for ages magnifies our unease. That much is certain. The Church has worked on women a double whammy. The Church would not have survived without the contributions and tireless work of women, and yet dismisses those same women—“Marthas ”—as less-than, second class in the realms of spirituality and community.

More than that, out of this very short story has come the cultural stereotype of “Marthas” as whining, bossy, intolerant women. And the far preferable “Marys” get stereotyped, too: as silent, passive, obedient beings.

All this is more than enough to make *all* of us feel indignant: “Marthas” *and* “Marys,” contemplatives *and* actives, women *and* men! (I need to pause and take a deep breath here!)

But this was never meant to be a story *against* women, never meant to put or keep women in their “place.” It’s a story that raises women up in the community of Jesus’ followers, advocates for women who take their place alongside Jesus and alongside the men as disciples. The story advocates for women who are disciples, students, teachers, leaders. Mary’s part “will not be taken away from her,” Jesus says.

The sad truth is that, clear as *Jesus* and *Luke* are that the role of discipleship is for women, it *was* taken away; and it took a long, long time to get it back. In large parts of Christ’s one, holy, universal and apostolic Church, women still don’t have it back. Though there is good news from the Church of England this week: after years of debate, the General Synod voted on Wednesday to allow women to be consecrated bishops, beginning sometime in the next two years.

We know Jesus recognized and affirmed Mary as his disciple. She shows us one face of hospitality: the receptive face of study, prayer, contemplation, listening, being present to Christ himself, and being present to Christ by being present to him in others.

But what about Martha? And what about all the women, and men, who offer hospitality to Jesus and others in more active, hands-on ways: washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning, mowing the grass, tending the gardens, making repairs, building houses, feeding the hungry, teaching all kinds of skills . . . ?

What are Martha and Jesus *saying* to each other here? What is really at the bottom of it all? If we took the time to sit and listen deeply to these two, listening for how they speak their words to each other and what desires, hopes or fears might be behind those words, what might we learn?

Martha says to him, “*Do you not care* that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” *Do you not care?* She believes that he is *indifferent* to her, and *indifferent* to . . . let’s call it her “plight.” That is terrifying, to feel that Jesus is indifferent, does not care about you and your situation. (No wonder this little story packs such a big emotional wallop!)

Martha is stuck in a place, a role, world view, she does not want to be in. She’s sure that Jesus could help her if only he cared. And the only help, the only way out of her plight that she can imagine is for her sister Mary to get up and help her. Because Mary is a woman, just as she is. As women, their options are limited. Domestic work is their only option.

And Jesus says to her, *Martha, Martha: No. You have it wrong, Martha. Mary has it right.*

That makes me cringe. No doubt it makes you cringe, too.

But I think that Jesus *does* care. I *know* he does. He knows Martha. He loves Martha, loves her as much as he loves Mary. He knows that both Martha and Mary love him, and that

each of them wants nothing more than to welcome him and serve him with everything they have and are.

Each of them would do *anything* for him, anything at all. And he would and will do everything he can do for their good, their wholeness. That's what he is on his way to Jerusalem to do: to give up his life, that we might all be whole.

He wants the good, the better, the best, for Martha, now. Any fool can see and hear that she is not in a good place right now, and he is no fool.

She is worried. Distracted. Indignant. Angry. She is resentful. She is hurt. She is crying out to him for help.

You might call it a prayer. I do.

And he answers her: *You are not stuck! There is a choice to be made here and you can make it for yourself, as Mary has done.*

I am sure that his words take Martha aback, as his words so often take his listeners aback, so often take us aback.

Right here Martha, and we, have a choice: shall we hold tight to our own perspective and take offense at what he says? Or shall we let what he says knock us a little silly, shake us up just enough to see ourselves and our situation a little differently?

Martha is right, I said, and I stick by that. What is happening for Martha is not fair. But that is not the end of the story. She is in a moment of choice; a moment that is both dangerous and hopeful .

Dangerous because there is something very satisfying in being right; something very energizing in holding up the rightness of your views, your principles, your demands, for all the world to see. There is strength to be had by settling in with resentment. *What I am doing is IMPORTANT! What is happening here is wrong and I deserve better! Everybody should notice how hard I'm working. Should give me credit, recognize me, appreciate me!*

The danger is that, instead of sitting down and feasting with Jesus and the community, instead of being fed by him and the fellowship, we may choose to feast on our resentment, instead. And end up being consumed by it.

The moment is hopeful because of course Martha may step back from her indignation and resentment. She may sit down with the others, right next to Mary, and listen to Jesus.

The moment is exciting. The future is wide open: who knows what will happen next? Dinner may wait until somebody has the idea that they can all go out to the stove and finish it together, then serve each other. If dinner is already on the table, they may all sit there listening

and talking for a long time, until somebody, maybe some of the men, realize it's time to clear the table and do the dishes.

Or, instead of sitting down to listen, Martha may go on with the work, but with a quiet mind and open heart now because she knows she is seen and heard, recognized and appreciated. Now she can hear Jesus even while she works. Noticing that, one of the disciples just may get up to help her with it, realizing that listening and serving, receiving and giving, aren't mutually exclusive.

Listening and serving, receiving and giving, contemplation and action: these are only two sides of the gospel, two sides of offering hospitality and being blessed with it in return.

Together they make a whole.