

**Sisterly Home
Martha & Mary
Sermon on Luke 10: 38-42**



Jesus Visits Martha and Mary

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, «Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.»

41 But the Lord answered her, «Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;

42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen what is good, and it will not be taken away from her.»

Sisters and brothers,

A week ago I preached on the story of The Woman Caught in Adultery. And on the front page of your bulletin was a graphic that is very dear to me. The graphic is one of several pictures hanging in my office. Not copies – no, real prints, originals. The artist Achim Schuster who was a member of Friedenskirche when we moved to Munich in 1992 gave them to me as a present after I had preached at the wedding of his son and daughter-in-law.

I had always admired those so-called stone-prints which Achim had named “Women around Jesus”. Achim knew how much I loved them and gave them to me with all the copy rights inclusive, shortly before he died.

For years I didn't have enough space to hang them all up. But then in 2003 when I moved into the Peace Church office, I had place for all of them.

One – as I said – shows the Woman Caught in Adultery; another one is on Martha & Mary; yet others are pictures of the Wedding at Cana, the Woman at the Well, and Mary Magdalene at Jesus' empty tomb.

If you look at Achim Schuster's print on your bulletin today, you see two women who look very much alike. The look on their faces, their eyes, noses, mouths are so similar. Even the head scarves and dresses are similar.

One of them has empty hands, and the other one seems to be holding communion in her hands. One of them is holding her hands in a gesture of receiving and prayer. The other one holds a tray with a loaf of bread and a jug of – well, let's say – wine.

The empty-handed, I believe, is Mary; the one holding bread and wine must be Martha. And to me it looks as if Martha is about to offer communion to Mary. Martha looks at Mary, but Mary does not respond to her gaze. Mary holds her head slightly bent down and towards Martha, but remains in prayer and meditation.

Behind those two stands Jesus, as if to connect them, as if to bind them together, and also to protect them and back them up.

The three of them are inside Martha's and Mary's house which they share with their brother Lazarus.

And there must be far more people in the room than just those three. "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way..." we read in verse 38 of our passage: so there were a lot of them. And although the New Testament makes us believe there were only 12 male disciples, we know from careful exegetical & historical research that there were always more than the 12, and that there were men and women following Jesus on his journeys through the country.

So, the three people on our stone-print today are only the centre of a big gathering in the house of three siblings. We have no idea where Lazarus, the brother of Martha & Mary is, but his sisters are there. And Martha, since she is the older sister, is the keeper of the house, or the lady of the house, if you like.

The two sisters Martha & Mary are often presented as being in conflict or in competition with each other. And often the story is interpreted, as if two kinds of personalities, or two ways of life, or two ways of spirituality were in conflict with each other. But is this really what the text says?

Jesus is a guest at Martha's & Mary's home. Martha is, as we are told in v40 distracted by all the preparations. Meanwhile Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to what he said (v39).

Mary never speaks. But Martha bursts in and asks:

«Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.» (v40b)

Jesus gently turns to Martha (it must have been gently, because he says "Martha" twice: Martha, Martha...), and leaves things as they are.

Martha is silent. Or silenced? Is she the loser? And is the reader not supposed to identify with her?

Scholars over the centuries emphasized that: Martha is the loser, and Mary is the winner...

However, not all commentators agree with that, especially not in the second half of the 20th and in 21st century.

What modern linguists discovered and found out, is that "Martha" is an Aramaic word for "the ruling lady", for "the sovereign". The name helps us understand Martha's well-off and dominant position. She is the hospitable mother of the house who welcomes Jesus and his innumerable friends. She performs the practical tasks that the visit demands. Her work is described with a Greek verb that throughout the New Testament is used for all sorts of services in the early church: serving at communion, proclaiming the word, providing leadership to the church.

No doubt: what Martha does is important and well perceived.

If there is conflict in the story, it is lying in the way in which Martha goes about her work: with fuss and agitation.

Wasn't she bearing a grudge deep in her heart, maybe a lack of self-control or self-esteem, we wouldn't even try to separate the gentle, listening Marys and the pragmatic and busy Marthas.

Martha and Mary are two sides in every person...

Martha is doing what needs to be done (as does the Good Samaritan whose story comes just before Martha's and Mary's); and Mary is choosing what is "good" (not "better" as some translations make us believe. The Greek word **agaton** means "good" not "better").

Immediately following the story of the two sisters is Jesus' teaching about prayer.

So, if we look closely at the whole big passage, the tale of Martha & Mary is embedded between a parable of doing good and the Lord's Prayer. It stands right between doing the work of God and being in contact and at peace with God.

Martha and Mary – we need to be both - within ourselves.

And we need to have both – in our families, in our churches, in this world.

It is never good, if faced with a physical need, we only put our hands together in prayer. Nor is it helping anybody if we are all fussing about and working all the time without holding on, taking a break, and finding some peace.

If I imagine Martha and Mary, I can see a calm and peaceful Mary sitting and listening, reflecting and concentrating. And I can see Martha: always a little distracted, busy hands and in a constant hurry.

The Marys of our world lend people their ears and their hearts, they give undivided attention and sympathy. The Martha's show their love and concern in the form of lovely food, tasty cakes, comfortable cushions, flowers on the table, and a home where people can relax.

In our story Jesus was not thinking little of the value of Martha's work compared to Mary's attentiveness. But in spite of all the sweat and energy that went into Martha's service, she was in real danger of losing her peace and her love with which she could have served even more lovingly.

Martha and Mary are sisters – as different as night from day. But that is just good – as it is!

Sisters are allowed to be different. Brothers, too.

And the miracle of living together peacefully in community, lies in sharing: sharing our talents and gifts, our thoughts, our skills, and our expectations.

In Achim Schuster's stone-print Martha and Mary are sharing: bread and wine and more. And the source of their reconciliation stands right behind them: in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

And should Jesus visit them again later, it may actually be Mary who brings the bread and the wine, and Martha who remains seated with folded hands and at peace with the very moment in which she has to decide to choose "what is good".

Martha and Mary can make us think...

Martha and Mary certainly have made me think...

about myself, my way of doing things, my activities, my frustrations and my expectations.

And they have made me think about my relationships
to those with whom I live and work:
my husband, my children, my church friends and others.
So often I am Martha or Mary only;
and I'd love so much to have a share in each of them at the right moments.

Last but not least, before my mind's eye I can see Martha and Mary sing for each
other: Brother, sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you...
Let us do that.
Let us respond to the story of Martha and Mary by singing...