

Living with Martha: Luke 10:38-42

by [Stephanie Frey](#) in the [July 13, 2004](#) issue

A friend of mine recalls that her mother always sat sideways in her chair during meals. Whether the table was surrounded by family members or invited guests, she was poised for action. She'd jump up if she'd forgotten something in the kitchen, if someone wanted steak sauce rather than the ketchup that was on the table, or if it was time to pass the serving dishes around again. This mom seldom relaxed enough to enjoy the food and conversation.

There is biblical precedent for that instinct and posture in the account of Jesus' visit to the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha offers immediate hospitality, welcoming Jesus and then busying herself with meal preparation, while Mary sits down with Jesus. One can imagine how the clatter of dishes in the kitchen grows steadily louder until Martha's exasperation at working alone is audible to Mary, who is engrossed in what Jesus is saying. Who is to say that passive-aggressive behavior didn't exist in New Testament households?

Finally Martha can't bear working alone any more and comes to where Jesus and her sister are talking. Pulled in all directions by a dozen tasks, she can no longer contain her frustration. She confronts the guest himself, challenging his care for her and asking him to send Mary into the kitchen. In an astounding breach of etiquette, Martha embarrasses her sister, and her Lord and no doubt herself as well.

Jesus doesn't mince words in his response. Calling her by name not just once but twice, in a manner that sounds more like a parent than a friend, he describes the situation. In Eugene H. Peterson's *The Message*, Jesus says: "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."

Perhaps Peterson's words "main course" for "better part" (NRSV) can help this well-worn story be heard in fresh ways. A woman in the parish I serve commented that she never likes hearing this text preached because she always comes away with the sense that it's never possible to get things right. If, like Martha, she works hard, she

will be labeled “overfunctioning.” If, like Mary, she sits and listens too long, nothing gets done. Giuseppe Belli’s 19th-century sonnet “Martha and Magdalene” ends with Martha snapping back at Jesus when he tells her that Mary’s choice is more important: “So says you, but I know better. Listen, if I sat around on my salvation the way she does, who’d keep this house together?” (*Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry*).

Thinking of God’s word as the “main course” in the feast of life, however, doesn’t give that immediate sense that listening is *better* than doing. Rather, it places these activities in balance. Whereas the corporate world reminds us to keep the “main thing the main thing,” Christians are urged to remember that the main course is just that, the main course. Jesus is the host, not Martha or Mary or any one of us, and he spreads the word like a banquet to nourish and strengthen us. The word has within it commands both to sit and listen, and to go and do. We “sit on our salvation,” as the sonnet has it, but then scatter into the world and work of daily life.

We 21st-century North Americans understand Martha’s predicament well. It isn’t only matters of hospitality that distract us and pull us in many directions; it’s the unrelenting nature of our schedules. Oddly enough, it seems less complicated to plow ahead and attempt to keep up with the calendar than to make a change. It is easier, for example, to make a casserole for a grieving family than it is to offer a word of hope in Christ, easier to welcome a new neighbor with a fresh loaf of bread than to invite her to worship.

Indeed, we are so distracted that our sense of Sabbath takes on an ironic twist. Worship becomes a “scheduling problem,” one that interferes with “the one day when we can sleep in and spend time with family.” But while the rest and recreation we seek are utterly in keeping with a scriptural understanding of Sabbath, those of us who miss worship lose the opportunity to rest in God’s word, to recline at the Lord’s feasting table for the sake of spiritual refreshment.

God’s commands are always backed with promise, and the story of Mary and Martha is no exception. Each story gives us energy and aptitudes for living lives rooted in Christ and reaching out in service—to the word and to the neighbor alike. Jesus is clear about the importance of the main course—it is not an appetizer or a side dish.

Living this side of Easter, we know what Mary and Martha could not know: that hearing and doing are finally in the realm not of law, but of gospel—because the

host of the banquet has himself become the main course. Whenever we are tempted to think that we do works of service to gain our own salvation, we might remember what theologian Gerhard Forde said to his students when he wanted to convey the wild, freeing nature of God's saving work in Christ: "What are you going to do, now that you don't *have* to do anything?"

The good news is that Jesus the host grants permission for all distracted, frantic people to sit down and eat their fill of word and promise. When we join them and nourish ourselves at the table, we'll be ready to put hands and feet, hearts and minds to work.