

Kitchen relief: Luke 10:38-42

by [Joy Douglas Strome](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

Even a cursory investigation of art through the ages that contains images of Mary and Martha will uncover a common thread. Invariably, Mary and Martha are snarling at one another, having been forever pitted against one another by the Gospel of Luke. Whether it is in their dress or the look on their faces, most artists have taken this short passage from Luke and turned it into a dichotomy of discipleship, with Mary on the upside and Martha on the down. Anyone who has ever been the last one out of the kitchen after a potluck dinner—where everyone else was sitting and chatting—feels the sting of Jesus' words as he lauds Mary's choice over Martha's. Anyone who has ever savored the luxury of time for spiritual development feels Mary's relief when Jesus affirms her choice to sit at his feet.

Not everyone can study. The dishes will pile up. Not everyone can be confined to the kitchen. The rage will pile up. People may come from east and west and north and south to sit at table with God, but someone will still have to set the table. It becomes convenient to hear Mary and Martha bickering; they are reduced to caricatures that are easily dismissed. Those silly women. Martha gets much better treatment from the Gospel of John, where she is articulate and empowered and acts in tandem with her male disciple counterparts.

A reluctance to use this passage as a manifesto about the place of women in the gospel leads us to look again at the passage. As a companion piece to the good Samaritan story, the Mary-and-Martha story has something to teach us that is unrelated to their gender. A lawyer has posed a question to Jesus about eternal life. What does it take to acquire it? When Jesus challenges him to recall the law, the lawyer answers: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. The story of the good Samaritan becomes the illustration of how one loves one's neighbor. The story of Martha and Mary becomes the illustration of how one loves God. Luke is working to define discipleship for the early church, and these two stories begin to pave a way. The Samaritan loves his neighbor, and Mary loves Jesus—and to be a disciple requires that one love both. Luke's choice of characters

will snap his community to attention. A Samaritan loving his neighbor? A woman sitting at the feet of Jesus—the place where disciples are supposed to sit? Scandalous! So, yes, Luke opens the way for women to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn—not at Martha’s expense, and not because she’s female, but for Martha’s benefit! And for the benefit of a community needing liberation from singular, closed-system thinking!

Looking back, we might wish Jesus had said something different: “You’re absolutely right, Martha. What was I thinking? Why don’t we all come into the kitchen and help with the dishes and talk while we work?” One twist of phrase and the Mary-Martha struggle could easily have been sidelined while Jesus’ main point was still made. The dinner party is not about the attendees, not about their roles and responsibilities, but about the guest of honor. And the guest is demanding full attention. For one to inherit eternal life, he insists, the love of God and neighbor must be front and center. No discussion. No time for distractions. No time for worry.

*Martha, dear Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. Step forward and listen. We know this chastisement. We understand Martha’s predicament. Today’s Martha could be working at a computer, checking her Blackberry or talking on her cell phone while driving and eating lunch. She could be on a treadmill while making appointments for the next day. She could be grading papers, her phone held between cheek and shoulder, checking in with family about coming home late. She could be trying to have a business meeting in the middle of a crowded airplane while juggling a watery cup of Coke. She could have a baby on one hip and a textbook for night class on the other. She could be receiving chemotherapy on her lunch hour and trying like crazy to save her job. She could be overscheduled, overbooked and overwhelmed. The pace could make her snap. The urgent demands of life collide with the urgent demands of the gospel—and anyone’s trigger can be tripped. Martha, dear Martha. We know you well.*

Distractions and worries abound. Jesus calls us to stop. Stop what we are doing and listen. There is need of only one thing. This good news is for you. It doesn’t matter if you are male or female, gay or straight, old or young, red or blue. Whether you are working in the kitchen or sitting on the floor, this good news is for you. You. There is need of only one thing.

For those of us caught in a never-ending swirl of priority setting with too much to do and too little time, drowning in commitment fatigue, swamped with busyness overload, Jesus offers the way. Gospel trumps busy. Gospel trumps worry. Gospel

trumps distractions. Always. Martha, dear Martha, there is relief.