

Poor Martha: Sunday, July 22. Luke 10:38-42

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

Then she was my high school sweetheart, now she is my wife of 25 years, but we still laugh about that evening when, sitting close on the couch in my living room, we were momentarily startled by a raucous noise directly overhead. Groaning and banging like a poltergeist, something seemed about to take the roof off the house, not to mention the glow off the evening. It turned out to be my mother, running a vacuum cleaner in the attic.

If cleanliness is next to godliness, I spent much of my childhood close to God. My mother believed in a standard of housekeeping that brooked no compromise. She believed in the Bible, too, though on that score she was less of a zealot, more open to interpretations. I cannot recall a single time when she quoted scripture *at* me; I do recall the few times when she expressed her views on a given passage *to* me. Once or twice these views took the form of doubts. I cherish those doubts just as I cherish those several verses where Jesus speaks without translation, in his native Aramaic, as if from his very heart. I cherished the times when my mother spoke of Jesus from *her* heart.

One such time was in reference to the story of Mary and Martha. This was all she said: "I always felt that Jesus was a little hard on poor Martha."

Of course, I knew whom my mother saw in poor Martha—just as I realize whom I have seen so poignantly in Nicodemus or in the Gerasene Demoniac. My mother saw herself. My mother would have been that bustling sister (though she herself was an only child) who troubled herself with much serving. Frankly, I doubt she would have protested against Mary's failure to pitch in. I doubt she would have protested about anything. She would have set the dishes on the table, sat down after Jesus and Mary had sat, and then sprung up again within the minute because someone was missing a spoon. Uncomplaining though she was, in the Lord's rebuke of Martha, my mother heard herself rebuked.

Anyone with a Martha streak does, and in this obsessively driven culture of ours, it would be hard to believe that anyone doesn't. Most of us are "troubled about many

things”; in fact, popular spirituality is prone to define perfection as the ability to “balance” many things. So even if we don’t see Jesus as being “hard on poor Martha,” we might not see him as being very helpful to us. I believe, however, that Jesus is trying to liberate Martha from the burden of obsessive duty.

He says to her “Martha, Martha” just as God calls to Abraham on Mount Moriah, “Abraham, Abraham . . . do not lay your hand on the boy.” Martha, Martha, do not do this violence to yourself. “One thing is necessary,” Jesus says to her, and the commentators tell us that he may be referring both to the kingdom of God and to a single—and sufficient—dish of food.

The defense that Martha might have offered, that my mother might have offered—even if she’d held her piece about Mary’s lounging about—is that somebody has to trouble herself “about many things” or they won’t get done. What mother hasn’t said that? What minister hasn’t said that?

In such a defense, however, lies the very two-edged sword that Martha has pointed at her own heart, the very sword that Jesus is trying gently to pry from her hands. The sharp edges of that sword—all the sharper for being paradoxical—are excessive devaluation of one’s own worth and excessive valuation of one’s own importance. Excessive devaluation, in that sitting in the parlor with Jesus is “all right for some,” but too wonderful for the likes of little me. Excessive valuation, in the sense that the world seems to rest on Martha’s shoulders, not God’s. What if Martha had done no serving at all—what would have happened then?

It’s a good question, but first let us consider what was really bothering Martha, because I think it was something much deeper than resentment at working alone. Notice that she doesn’t complain to her sister about slacking off but to Jesus for letting her sister get away with it. Martha suspects, as many cast in her mold suspect, that Jesus loves the “spiritual” sister better, that Jesus has little regard for the mundane offices Martha performs.

She is mistaken. I believe that had Martha laid out a big spread, Jesus would not have dismissed it with some pithy adage about simplicity. I think he would have praised her labor of love and, like the “glutton and winebibber” he was alleged to be, he would have dug right in. It is only when Martha’s labor of love becomes a cry of pain that he questions its necessity. In other words, when we begin to ask in our hearts, “Why am I doing this all by myself?” Jesus joins in the question. Why

indeed? He's willing to accept the favor, but he hasn't commanded it.

Still, I am my mother's son, and I have sometimes wondered if Jesus wasn't a little easy on dear Mary. She had chosen the "good portion," yes, but perhaps she was a little slow to digest the food. If she had truly heard the good news, would she not also have seen her sister's distress? I'm not sure. But I do have an answer to that earlier question: What would have happened if Martha had done no serving at all? Answer: People would have started to get hungry. And then, perhaps, Jesus would have done for his beloved Mary and no-less beloved Martha what I did too seldom for my mother, and for that woman I once wooed beneath my mother's immaculate attic: He would have headed for the kitchen, and found bread, and broken it—and you know the rest.