

Does Jesus understand sisters? (Luke 10:38-42)

Does he really need to add the part about Mary's choice being better?

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Jesus and his disciples are on their Lucan journey to Jerusalem. They enter a village, where a woman named Martha receives them into her house. She is the key player. I'm the oldest of five siblings, and I wonder if she is also the older sister. Not one word is spoken by her sister Mary, who sits at the "Lord's feet and listens to his teaching."

That might sound restful and spiritual or just plain lazy, depending upon who does the work and who does the sitting in your family. Martha, we are told, is "distracted with much serving," which tells us she is not happy with her role, but she's doing it anyway: making dinner, sweeping up, while the two of them sit restfully in the living room. How many times have you been in the kitchen, or outside lighting the charcoal, setting the table, schlepping chairs, while others sit, calm and relaxed? Is this your problem because you never ask for help, or because of their thoughtlessness?

Hoping Jesus can do something to change her situation, Martha involves herself in the ancient family practice of indirect speech. Speaking not to Mary (I get the feeling she's tried that) but to Jesus (while Mary sits at his feet within earshot), she says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help

me.” Martha wants Jesus to do something.

Which he does. But he doesn’t put Mary to work; he talks to Martha: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, one thing is needful.” The way he repeats her name, you get the feeling he is truly trying to get the attention of a busy, distracted person.

Then Jesus makes his big mistake: he adds that the choice Mary has made is the better one, which will not be taken from her. Does he really need to add that? Maybe Jesus doesn’t know much about sisters. Mary is sitting serenely at Jesus’ feet while water needs to be drawn and the rice is burning. She probably showed up without the wine and bread she promised to bring.

Jesus could suggest that the three of them cook the meal together—or acknowledge that it isn’t fair for Martha to be left in the kitchen alone. Or he could invite Martha to tell Mary how frustrating it is to have a sister who doesn’t help. (To which Mary would confess her willingness to help if Martha wasn’t so bossy).

We don’t know any more about this story. We do know that it’s just one tiny window into a lifetime of two sisters and their close friendships with Jesus. Jesus gets to the heart of Martha’s distress and invites her to rest, to sit with him, to listen, to let him share her burdens and give her peace. It is a beautiful story, one that leaves room for your story and mine.