

How Do We Love God

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Texts: Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

Video sermon might differ slightly from this written manuscript

Good Morning First Church. I hope everyone is staying safe in this heat today. Please, if you are feeling the need for water, grab yourself a cup of it anytime you need or alert someone if you are feeling faint.

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

If you were with us last week we reflected together on the parable of the Good Samaritan, how Jesus' questions teach us to sit with the discomfort of finding mercy and grace for our neighbors in unexpected places. At the beginning of our passage from last week Jesus names the law to love God and love our neighbor and the author of the gospel of Luke presents two illustrations of how both of those things can be done. First, the parable of the Good Samaritan shows the hearer how to love our neighbor and knowing that there is one more part to come we anticipate that the story of Mary, Martha and Jesus that we read this morning will illustrate how to love God.

I've got to be honest this story is a tough one. Many have struggled to make sense of this section of Luke's Gospel, drawn to it because it focuses on two women hosting Jesus in Martha's home and perplexed by this little pesky phrase "Mary has chosen the better part." This is how the scene is set: Mary sitting by Jesus listening to his teaching as Martha takes care of all the tasks that come with having an honored guest in her home. After a while understandably, Martha gets frustrated she isn't receiving any help from her sister and complains to Jesus about it. In the end, Jesus reassures Martha that Mary is doing just what she needs to be doing and at first read it seems that he is basically telling her she is worrying too much by paying attention to what needs to get done.

The interpretive history of this short, but powerful narrative has in some instances done a great deal of harm and in all instances isn't very clear in what the point is supposed to be. Often this story has been used to instruct on women's roles in ministry or has been used allegorically to argue the primacy of Christianity over Judaism. One little passage, so many ways an interpretation can go wrong. It is easy to

look at this interaction and to see two women who are very different from one another, one choosing to be distracted by housework and the details, or more properly translated the embodied work of ministry, the other choosing to focus on the teachings of Jesus and pit them against one another. Be a Mary, not a Martha as many people I'm sure have said in earnest from pulpits or kitchen tables in one way or another. If you google image search Mary and Martha, you'll find a fair amount of paintings as well as short stories for young girls about Martha with "Busy Girl" written as a title in cursive text at the top or a particularly amusing graphic of the two women's icons side by side with the text below it saying, "who chose the better part?" The ring of a bell and an image of a wrestling match came immediately to my mind when I saw that one and I laughed in disbelief.

Martha, a widow, the leader of her church out of her own home and resources, someone so close to Jesus that he stayed in her house as a close family friend, being called a "Busy Girl" in a lesson plan in 2022. What a disservice to our spiritual ancestors. I find that when we are hungry for women being represented in our sacred texts we run the risk of turning them into these caricatures, exaggerations of the full humans and ministers these women were, leaving room to dehumanize them and therefore shame them. It is in that dehumanization, by denying the fullness of women's humanity and authority in our scripture that primes the interpreter to judge in this binary and limited way.

Berne Brown, a sociologist by training, in my opinion a minister among us by practice defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do that makes us unworthy of connection." This shame speaks against the very gospel Jesus was all about. Readings of this passage as instructive of women's roles in ministry have suggested women following Jesus are quiet listeners, not project managers. They are Mary's, not Martha's. Anyone who is intimately involved in the workings of the church knows that this is not the case. Women who follow Jesus are definitely project managers and most of the time they are project managers who actively listen to the movement of the Spirit too. It is both/and, not either/or.

If we wait just a bit longer in the Gospel of John Martha is the one to proclaim Jesus' identity in the world. She says to him and other bystanders of her brother Lazarus' death, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." (Ch 11:27) and she says this before Jesus even does a thing. Her faith is astounding. Her prophetic wisdom brings others closer to God and to new life. When we don't consider her whole personhood and relationship to the Jesus movement there is an inherent shaming that happens, a shame that has worked its way into many other interpretations of our tradition when it comes to women's roles and bodies in the life and work of God in the world. When this

text is approached in this narrow archetypal way, business vs contemplation, we lose the gifts of wisdom that this narrative gives for us all as people who are trying to learn how to love God and follow God's law that is closer to us than our very heartbeat.

In the Gospels, the disciples that we encounter who are men with all their many mistakes and worries are people we are taught to see as examples of people of faith for all genders. It's hard to imagine that there is a short story out there entitled "Overly Cautious Boy" to describe Peter's life and ministry. What would it mean for us to see this short narrative that happens inside a woman's house church as a calling to center loving God in all that we do, even the embodied work of ministry? What would it mean for us to repent of our shame, to repent of shaming others, and to hear an invitation in Jesus' statement instead of a judgment?

Our lectionary text this week from the Torah also tells a story of hospitality, depicting a scene of Sarah and Abraham preparing for their traveling guests, feeding them, and hearing unexpected news about the future birth of a child. The value of hospitality was deeply ingrained in the culture of Jesus' people, so it is hard to believe that Jesus would have disapproved of the tasks associated with hosting him in Martha's home. Perhaps today here in our passage from Luke, we are called in to consider what it means to provide hospitality for Jesus in our lives, what it means to get so close to Jesus that we are comfortable laying bare our needs and emotions at his feet like Martha does. What would it mean for us if we were unafraid to get close to God? What if this story is about finding out that when we love God enough to tell God about our anger and confusion in our lives, we are met with reassurance and grace; met with an invitation to stay present and dwell with God even amidst all of the turmoil.

So, what is this complicated short story telling us, all of us, about loving God? There is not one answer. But perhaps this morning we can see that we love God by letting God into the parts of ourselves that need the most love. The parts that feel abandoned, alone, and overwhelmed. The parts of us that have been shamed. We come to love God in letting ourselves feel safe enough to be our full selves in our faith lives and in our relationships within our church community. We love God by being honest and real and by speaking our truth. Our role as people who follow Jesus is not to show up to church projecting a perfect facade, but as people who are imperfect yet believe or want to believe in the transformative and liberative power of God.

We are not known by God as one kind of person, fitting into one box in order to make others comfortable, God knows all of the parts of us- the times when we summon the courage and strength to declare that Jesus will deliver the world from more violence even after experiencing the weight of grief. And God knows us in the times when we experience the need to be messy and feel deeply the hurts and

injustices of our lives in front of people who we know love us in return. In all that Martha does she tells her whole truth and because of those moments she is called deeper and deeper into loving God with her whole heart, with her whole soul, with her whole mind and strength. And may we all go and do likewise. Amen.

