

“The Monkey and the Cat”
Amos 8:1-12, Luke 10:38-42
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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings
The problem is not Mary's activity (or lack of) but her identity

Lots of you know that one of the special spiritual places in my life has been the Abbey Church on island of Iona in Scotland. Many hours of the weeks that I was there were happily spent sitting in the choir of the Abbey looking at the stained glass representations of St. Columba, and Patrick and Brigid and Margaret. But as I sat there I began to notice several interesting things. This church dates back to the 1200s when the Benedictine order rebuilt it on the site of an even more ancient church. But when you wander through the church and you step on the stone floor where so many pilgrims have walked through the centuries, you can't help but step on some of the stones that have a cross carved in them and you realize that someone's bones were buried beneath that stone hundreds of years ago. Soon your eyes look to the stones in the great arched vaults above you. It took me many days but after a while my eyes lit on a stone high above that I thought was misshapen. But as I looked closer in better light, I saw it wasn't misshapen, it was carved. And it was carved in the shape of a monkey. That made no sense. Why in the world would 13th century Scottish and Irish monks carve a monkey on a stone and then place it in their church? As I thought about this I looked to the other side of the church and opposite the monkey at the same high level was a small carving of a cat. A cat. A monkey and a cat. Why? I finally asked one of the people from the Iona Community, the Christian group who live and work around the Abbey and he smiled and told me that the early Benedictine monks placed those stones there as a reminder of the two parts of their lives, the monkey who was active and constantly doing things, and the cat who liked nothing better than to lie quietly in the sun and enjoy the peace. The monkey and the cat. The active and the passive.

I think of that every time I hear the passage that Byron read for us today, the story of Mary and Martha. Martha and Mary were sisters and we think that they lived near Jerusalem with their brother Lazarus. But this night when Jesus was there for dinner, there's a little family drama that is enacted. Martha is

being the good hostess, running around making sure everyone has everything that they need. We know people like that, don't we? We might be someone like that ourselves. If you invite someone over to your house, especially someone who's never been there before, and someone you might want to impress, you do everything you can to prepare, don't you? You clean and clean. You clean things that your guest may never even see, just in case. I used to hate for my mother to come visit. I mean I would love for her to visit, but I hated the three days of cleaning that it would require before the house was good enough to show to my mother. And you take great care in preparing dinner, making sure it's something special. That's Martha. So how do you think she feels when her sister, Mary, does nothing to help when Jesus arrives but just sits and listens to Jesus talk. Shouldn't she be helping? So she says to Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" And actually, Jesus doesn't care. "Martha, Martha, Martha. You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." Now was that nice or helpful? Shouldn't Mary be helping? Maybe not. Maybe it's important for us to realize that constantly doing things and trying to multitask five things at once is not good for us. Maybe we need to sit and listen. Maybe we need to sit at Jesus feet for a bit. For years this passage was used to show that the quiet life is better than the busy one. It was used to argue that the contemplative life was to be preferred over the active one. Is that true? Is that why Jesus says what he does? "Other people argue that what Jesus is doing is criticizing what we might call "busy work Christianity." They think that Martha is so preoccupied with her little, trivial chores, cooking all those dishes, that she has missed the deeper spiritual point. She is, they say, like so many religious people who spend all their time organizing the stewardship drive or baking pies for the church picnic or going to committee meetings or gathering clothing for the church clothes closet--busy, busy, busy--but who lack a profound devotional life. In their view, Jesus says to Martha, "Stop being so busily religious and start being more spiritual, like Mary."

Well, I understand that point, and I do hear a lot of people today say things like, "You know I'm not into organized religion. I don't believe in institutional Christianity. That's just playing church. I'm spiritual,

but not religious," but I don't believe that holds any water either. The institutional church can be corrupt, that's true; but this doesn't take away from the fact that Christian faith is never an abstract, disembodied purely spiritualized thing. It always takes on solid, embodied active form."¹ If our youth had gone to West Virginia and sat in the church and prayed the whole time, would that have done the people there any good? If we come here to worship and pray, but then go out into the world and do nothing, what kind of a church are we? Isn't that the very thing that the prophet Amos condemns? Aren't we supposed to be more concerned for the poor than for the state of our souls? Aren't we to be working as hard for justice in society as we are for uplifting worship? So what is this story all about? I think that it is important to see that this is a story not just about what Mary is not doing, but it is a story about who Mary is. The problem Martha has is not just that Mary wasn't helping her, but the problem was that she was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening. That is the role that is normally taken by a disciple. That is the role that is normally taken by a man. That's not Mary's place. That's the problem. I think that Luke's point is not that Mary was choosing the contemplative life over the active one, but she is commended for being a disciple, a follower of Jesus.

The Benedictines put the symbols of the monkey and the cat in their churches to remind them that both are necessary. The active and the quiet. Work and prayer. Service and contemplation. To the Benedictine monks of medieval times those were false divisions in the church. They believe that to work is to pray, to pray is to work. The monkey and the cat go together, you can't choose one over the other. Everyday Benedictine monasteries begin the day with morning prayer together before they go off to their daily tasks, but there is never an "Amen" at the end of the prayer service. They believe that they are just as much in worship as they work, one flows into the other, there is no distinction.

That's the problem with the story of Mary and Martha, when we make distinctions. Luke's point is that there should be no distinctions between people. He brought it up a few verses before this in the story

1 Long, Thomas. "Mary and Martha"

of the Good Samaritan that we read last week. That story told us that we should show mercy to one another, even when it is someone we don't expect. This story tells us that disciples of Christ also may be someone we don't expect. Both stories show someone who is acting as a true disciple of Christ—on the one hand actively showing mercy and caring for another, on the other hand sitting quietly and listening to the words of Christ. Both are necessary in our lives as disciples of Jesus. But Luke also shows that the problem comes when we focus or try to determine who should be a worthy disciple. Last week a Samaritan, this week a woman. Martha's complaint is not just that she is not helping, but that she as a woman is not in the right place. If their brother Lazarus was there listening to Jesus, would Martha have complained. No, for that was a man's place. But Jesus praises Mary, seeing that she has chosen the important part, being a disciple. It's not being active versus being passive. It's a choice of being a disciple or not.

Tom Long, a preaching professor from Princeton tells the story about a friend of his who was taking a church youth group on a mission trip to Jamaica. On their trip they visited one of the local elementary schools, and they spent some time observing in a classroom seriously overcrowded with children, most of them very poor, all of them needy and wiggly and noisy and unruly. It was a difficult, sometimes even chaotic, learning environment; but the youth group marveled to see that the teacher carried herself with great calm and patience, treating all of the children with love and respect, despite the poverty and the chaos. They decided that the only way she could do this was that she must really love being a teacher. But they were surprised to hear her say, "Oh, I don't come here everyday mainly because I love teaching. I come here every day because I love Jesus, and I see Jesus in every one of these children."²

I think that teacher had been like Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet. And because she had, she could get up like Martha and teach those children with joy and hope, seeing Jesus in the face of every one of them.

Amos teaches us to see the face of God in the poor. Luke teaches to see the face of God in the stranger

² Long, Thomas G. *Mary and Martha*. Day 1, July 22, 2007.

and in women and the powerless. Maybe, as we sit at the feet of Christ we will discover that sitting next to us are people from all walks of life and there is no distinction. Maybe we'll see that the spirit of God is in all of us.