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Sermon: Finding Balance between Martha and Mary

Sermons

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If you like to garden or plant flowerbeds, there is a lot to do in the spring. There is getting the soil ready and planting, fertilizing, mulching, and all the watering. For awhile there is a flurry of activity then it all settles down. Aside from some weeding and watering, there is not a lot to do until it's time to harvest. But if the watering and weeding aren't done then there will be no harvest. It can be tedious and mundane, but the tedious and mundane must be done in order for all the work in the spring to pay off. The church year is set up the same way. We have just come out of the flurry of activity that began on the first Sunday of Advent. We have been through Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and now Pentecost. We celebrated the events of Jesus' life and the birth of the church—all the high holy days have come and gone. And this Sunday begins what the church year calls Ordinary Time. This time of the year is called Ordinary Time because the order of services in liturgical churches does not vary from the regular schedule. From the Sunday after Pentecost to the Sunday before Advent, this is the watering and weeding time of the church year. There aren't any high holy days to celebrate and a lot of activity to be involved in, but just as in our gardening, what we do this time of the year will determine how well we worship and celebrate during the high activity times in the church.



Martha and Mary by Denis Maurice

In Luke 10:38-43 we meet two sisters who can give us some ideas of how we can spend Ordinary Time in order to be ready for the high activity time when it rolls back around later this year.

This has always been one of my favorite stories because of the intimacy of it: Jesus is hanging out with friends in their home—just like we do.

First we're going to give Martha her due—all of us would be doing the same exact thing if Jesus came over to visit us. And if Jesus and His disciples ate anything like Pastor Jonathan we're talking a lot of food.

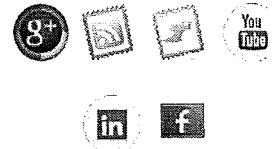
One way to look at this story is to put the sisters on opposite poles—Martha is the doer; Mary is the one being with Jesus. There's only one problem with looking at the story this way: none of us live in a world where we can divide our lives into either doing or being—we need both. So did Mary and Martha. The Martha things have to be done: we need to eat and clean and do laundry, and all of those other wonderful normal life things. Let's face it, we can't sit around all day being filled with glory: life does happen. And the same is true in the church: there are things that have to be done. Outreach, evangelism, and hospitality are a few of the Martha things the church needs to do. So we really can't polarize the two sisters the way most people want to. Yes, prayer and devotion are needed, but the natural outflow of time spent with Christ is service to others. Martha and Mary are two sides of one coin.

Going back to the observation that this Sunday begins Ordinary Time—we have just ended the season in the church that is Martha's season. There has been a lot of activity, and we have done a lot. But now begins Ordinary Time—the time of watering and waiting—Mary's season. The question is will we switch gears? Although Mary is the one who is lifted up and admired for choosing the best part, and Martha is the sister we shake our heads over, most of us in our day-to-day lives act more like Martha than we do Mary. Or anyway I do. When we get busy it's easier to drop the Mary part of our lives. Most of the time when we get busy our devotional life is the first thing to suffer. Because there again, the Martha things—like eating—have to be done.

About this site

Rev. Shawna R. B. Atteberry is an author, preacher, theologian, and speaker who writes, dreams, and talks about women in the Bible and feminist theology. In her spare time she writes urban fantasy. Her first book *What You Didn't Learn in Sunday School: Women Who Didn't Shut Up & Sit Down* is available for purchase from Amazon or Wipf & Stock Publishers.

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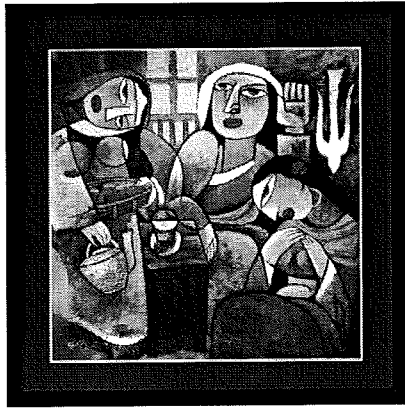
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As we begin the season in the church called Ordinary Time what can we do to make sure that we are watering what has been planted during all the activity of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost? The first thing Mary did was stop and sit. She left the activity of the kitchen, went and sat at Jesus' feet. The first thing we need to do is decide when we are going to stop and spend time with Jesus. The next thing Mary did was listen. Now we normally equate this with devotional time: reading the Bible and praying, and that's fine. That is one way to read this story, but there is another way. This is more than just "quiet time with Jesus."



Martha and Mary by He Qi

In Jesus' day and age women were not taught the Bible. In fact, one rabbi of the time said it was more profitable to teach your dog the Scripture than your wife. In this time to sit at a rabbi's feet meant that you were receiving formal training with him as his disciple. Mary sat at Jesus' feet with the other disciples, and Jesus taught her as he taught them. This was formal religious education—not just quiet time. Relax. I'm not going to suggest that everyone go to seminary. But this does mean we should be studying the Bible. So may be part of the water and waiting time of this season should be a little in-depth Bible study. It might also be a good time to read about what others have said about Jesus and following him. Some of the more modern writers include Henri Nouwen, Marva Dawn, and Susan Muto. But don't be afraid to dive into the old fogeys either: Augustine, Hildegard von Bingen, Benedict, or Teresa

of Avila. Madeline L'Engle said that "Faith is best expressed in story." Some of the best theology you will read anywhere can be found in novels: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Hannah Hurnard's *Hinds Feet on High Places* and *Mountains of Spice*, C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, any book by Madeline L'Engle. I couldn't be the Tolkein freak I am if I forgot *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Ring* trilogy.

I know I've just given you a lot, but I like having options, so I like giving a few as well. As you're thinking about this summer and the things you would like to do to draw closer to Jesus as Mary did, remember why we are stopping, sitting, listening, and learning. We are doing all of this to know him. We are setting this time aside to know Godde.

In the end, I don't think we need to polarize the two sisters as much as we do. Martha and Mary can be brought together. This was done a few hundred years ago by a monk named Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence joined a monastery because he wanted to devote his time to quiet prayer and meditation. Once in the monastery guess where Brother Lawrence found himself? He was assigned to run the kitchen. So much for quiet. But in the middle of all of his activity, getting up early to collect eggs, haggling at the marketplace, picking veggies, and fixing meals, he discovered that Godde was with him in all the noise and busyness of his life. He said, "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess GOD in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."

I saw this growing up with my mom. Mom would be out in the kitchen making supper when I would hear her start to hum hymns, and I knew she was praying. She still does it: I go home, and I'll hear her out in the kitchen. And I wait. Then it begins: the humming and the praying. I find I do the same thing when I'm cooking in my kitchen.

As we make time to do the Mary things: sit, listen, and learn, we'll find being aware of Godde's presence in the ordinary busyness of our lives becomes more and more normal. We'll also find we don't have to be either Martha or Mary; at different times we will be both. There are times we will be called to spend time with Godde alone. There will be other times we are busy serving our families, friends, church, and community. These two sides of life should move naturally in and out of each other. As we spend time with Godde, she will give us the desire to serve. As we serve and run low on resources, we go back to Godde for fresh indwelling.

As we go into communion I want to read the Brother Lawrence quote again: "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess GOD in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament." We are getting ready to receive the Blessed Sacrament—communion. As you take this time to spend with Godde, ask her to remind you of this moment through your busy week, and to make you more aware of her presence in the busyness of your life as she made her presence known to Brother Lawrence in the busyness of his kitchen.

This post was originally published in June 2007. I breathed new life into it for Day 21 in The SITS Girls 31 Days to Building a Better Blog Challenge.

Did you know there are only eight verses in the Bible that discourage women from speaking and holding leadership positions in the church? Did you know there are thousands of verses in the Bible that tell the stories of women who were leaders in their homes, towns, and religious circles? Meet the women in the Bible who were