

When I first started working on the program staff at Camp Nawakwa, I joined a well-oiled machine of experienced leaders who had worked together in previous summers and who I will always remember as the “A Team” of leadership staffs. As the behind-the-scenes support network, we made sure that all the activities the counselors wanted to do with the campers ran smoothly, which, for a large camp that offered multiple programs every week, was a lot of work. We had a blast, but we were in the office every day before breakfast, and we were still working after lights out every night. But my second year on staff, only one of those team members returned with me; the new leaders included two former counselors who never seemed to have noticed how much had been done for them when they were in that position, and who were eager to join the program staff because they thought we just hung out in the air conditioned office all day. The third leader was a pastor who was between calls and was there with his young family. The other experienced staffer and I listened in horror as the two newbies told the young dad to feel free to step out whenever he wanted to spend time with his family. That was a lovely, gracious offer for them to make...but we knew they made it because they had no idea how much time the job really required. We wondered who they thought was going to make up the third person’s workload—of course, we didn’t have to wonder for long. That summer was exhausting, in more ways than one. Maybe some of you have participated in “team”work like that? And if you have, I bet some of you are Team Martha in today’s gospel reading.

This Mary and Martha may be the same sisters whose brother Lazarus Jesus raises in John’s gospel, but if so, it is unusual that Martha, a woman, is named as the host who welcomes Jesus into her home. Whether Martha is the head of a wealthy household and is occupied with directing servants, or this is a family of more modest means and Martha is making preparations herself, she resents being left to do all the work while her sister Mary sits listening at Jesus’ feet—a posture that identifies Mary as a student and disciple, also unusual for a woman at the time. To be clear, the work that Martha is doing is not the problem: social customs demanded that visitors and strangers be shown hospitality. In our reading from Genesis, Abraham *ran* to offer hospitality to the three men who came near his tent, and in doing so ended up entertaining the Lord. In the earlier chapters of Luke’s gospel, Jesus sends the disciples ahead, urging them to accept the hospitality offered to them in the villages they visit. When Jesus turns up at Martha’s house with his disciples, *someone* was going to have to figure out how to set 13 extra places at the table. Martha is serving others, which Jesus tells his disciples again and again is what they are called to do.

However, Martha departs from good hosting manners by publicly triangulating the honored guest, forcing Jesus into the middle of a family squabble and asking him to take sides. Martha’s bold complaint suggests that she and her family must be very close friends with Jesus; otherwise it would be hard to imagine her speaking to him this way. And although Martha doesn’t end up getting her own way, perhaps this is a good reminder that Jesus can handle our honest frustration when we feel like saying *Lord, do you not care...* about whatever injustice we perceive in our lives. Martha considers the

work that she is doing to be of utmost importance; from her perspective, Mary is doing nothing to help. Yet, that doesn't mean that Mary is doing nothing; sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to what he says is a big something.

Jesus does not discount or devalue the hospitality that Martha has offered; he doesn't say, *Don't worry about it; we'll just call for a pizza*. And although Luke doesn't include this in his story, we can assume that Jesus, and the 12 friends he showed up with, eventually sat at the table Martha set, and ate the food Martha cooked, and dirtied the dishes that Martha washed. Jesus does not respond with ingratitude, but he does ask Martha to see beyond her own perspective. *You are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed, indeed only one*. Jesus may be implying that in addition to satisfying reasonable expectations of hospitality, Martha has made more work for herself than was necessary—certainly more work than anyone asked her to do. We religious people love to do that—not just follow Jesus' simple instructions of loving God and loving other people, but adding all sorts of other requirements that God never asked for, and then getting mad at other people for not following the rules we made up. Anyway, Jesus gently points out to Martha that she was so focused on what she thought she needed to do, she'd lost the plot.

Jesus, who even after 40 days of fasting in the wilderness said that man does not live by bread alone, explains that Mary has chosen that *good* part—that one needed thing—and he's not going to tell her to stop because Martha has decided something else is more appropriate. This is probably not Jesus making a sweeping social statement about the kinds of work associated with traditional gender roles; there are other passages where Jesus is more egalitarian than here. But Jesus does show Martha that just because Mary isn't serving in the same way that she is, that doesn't mean what Mary is doing is unimportant. After all, if Martha is working for Jesus, who is a teacher, then Martha should want her efforts to help students learn from Jesus—even if she wishes one of those students would pick up a paring knife or a dishtowel now and again.

Scripture is full of reminders that the Spirit gives us a variety of gifts and calls us to serve in a variety of ways. Asking Jesus to referee and to make others serve the way we think they should misses the mark. Although this passage has sometimes been interpreted to mean that some of us are destined to be Martha's and others Mary's, really we're called to be both. If these are indeed the same sisters from John's gospel, then we know that Martha also took her turn listening to Jesus; when her brother Lazarus dies, her conversation with Jesus about the resurrection shows that she, too, studied theology. We aren't just one or the other; we discern the needs of the community at any given time and respond on behalf of others, instead of focusing only on ourselves. We all need to listen at Jesus' feet sometimes; how else will we know where we are called? And sometimes we need to make that space for others, just as others make that space for us. Whether today calls us to Martha's tasks or Mary's devoted attention, may we answer with gracious joy.