**Sermon: Mary and Martha**

Silvia Purdie, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 21 July 2019

Luke 10:38-42 Colossians 1:15-23

This story of Martha and Mary has been a significant one for me over the years. And yet this is the first time I have preached on it.

We begin with a moment of prayer

*Jesus, friend Jesus, come into our lives. Make yourself at home.*

*We welcome you. Speak your truth into our hearts and minds*

*as we sit at your feet*

*and as we serve. Amen.*

Let’s start by setting the scene. Where are we?

There were two homes that Jesus used as home base. In the north, in Gallilee, he was based in Peter’s family home, in Capernaum, on the lake front, with the smell of fish and lots of people crowding at the door, or even busting in through the roof. Peter’s home was a family, with a wife, kids, their grandmother. It was a bustling busy multigenerational home.

Then down south Jesus stayed in the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, in Bethany. This was different. More of a retreat for Jesus. Crowds did not follow him there. He would teach and heal and argue up the road in Jerusalem and then walk home to Bethany for a quiet meal and a good night’s sleep. Martha’s home, for it was Martha’s house, was large, she was wealthy. And there is no mention of husbands or children or parents. From the gospel texts we have to assume that there were only the 3 of them living there. 3 siblings. Actually kind of odd when you think about it. What had happened to their parents? Why were they not married? In that society at that time the most obvious answer is – death. We can assume that their parents had both died, leaving them the house and property. Given that Martha is clearly a grown woman we can also assume that she would have already been married, and that her husband had died, before she could have children.

This is a family acquinted with grief. Which makes the death of Lazarus all the more terrible.

As for Lazarus and Mary, it is quite possible that they were both quite young, maybe still teenagers. As yet unmarried. Mary did not have a father to arrange a marriage for her.

That’s my take on it anyway.

One thing is clear from the gospels: they were loved by Jesus of Nazareth. And no doubt they loved him with a shining joy.

How did they meet, I wonder? What was it that Jesus saw in them that he chose them as his family, chose their home as his home, I wonder.

An interesting detail here is that Martha’s name might be more of a title than a personal name. ‘Martha’ is the female equivalent to the aramaic title ‘Lord’. Which does not translate at all well into English. What’s the female equivalent for Lord? – Lady? or how about Master? – Mistress? that means something quite else these days!

Is there an English word for a female boss?

Martha was boss of her house. She managed things, income and expenditure, the home business, as well as looking after her young siblings.

Isn’t it funny then that her name, Martha, has come to be associated with lowly humble service – we talk about the Marthas of this world, don’t we.

And we remember this story as Jesus criticising her for being too obsessed with the womenly jobs of cooking and cleaning, as though those things weren’t important. Which is really not what happened.

So what did happen?

In my best guess Jesus and his disciples arrived late in the afternoon, and for a while it was all hands on deck, rushing around getting water for washing feet and rescuing the bread from the oven before it burned and pouring the wine, inbetween quick hugs and shouted questions about where they’ve been and what has been happening.

And then it’s the meal, and they are all seated around the low table and everything is sheer job of being together and there is delight in the stories and sharing. And Martha is full of delight that her hospitality is good, the hummus is perfect and the company is excellent and then comes that wonderful silence as hungry people become content and full and squeeze in just one more date and sigh happily.

Then, the plates are cleared away and Mary brings in the coffee and pours it … and then she is far too interested in the conversation to go back to the kitchen. So she sits down at Jesus’ feet, sidles in close, hoping desperately that no one would glare at her, and is encouraged by Jesus smiling at her. Everyone is far too interested in what Jesus is saying to mind Mary joining them.

How did that feel, for Mary, do you think? If that was you, sitting there just beside Jesus’ knee, with the 12 disciples talking with him, asking hard questions about God, Jesus telling a story, sharing from his heart … how would that feel, I wonder? What would spark in your heart?

She can hear her name being called from the kitchen – *Mary? Mary can you …? Where is that girl?*

But Mary chooses to ignore Martha’s voice. A few minutes later there’s more frustration in Martha’s voice calling her. And Mary catches a glimpse of Martha beckoning her from the doorway. Mary ignores her. What Jesus is saying is too important, too wonderful. The dishes can wait.

Then suddenly Martha bustles in. And everyone falls silent for clearly Martha is angry. The disciples look intently at the ceiling, or their fingernails

I wonder if you can talk for a moment about Martha’s words to Jesus.

*“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”*

Talk about it with the person next to you:

**What might Martha be feeling?**

**What does she ask from Jesus?**

Jealous – reminds me of being big sister and making dinner while my sister watched TV and fuming inside.

Self-righteous: I’m doing all the work

Unjust: It’s not fair!

Victim: funny how people who feel like martyrs can be the most aggressive

And how does Jesus respond?

What tone of voice is in Jesus’ words?

I think he gets cross with her back. I think it was quite the argument!

*Martha!*

Why do I think there is a tone of anger in his reply? Because I think the one thing that Jesus likes least of all is people using him to build up their own authority.

Martha was using Jesus, and Jesus does not like to be used. If she has a problem with Mary’s choice, then deal with it directly with Mary. Don’t manipulate Jesus into your own agenda, Martha.

We have to watch that ourselves. It’s always one of the problems with religion, we’re always trying to get God to do what we want, to back us up, to make other people do what we want. We have to watch that in our prayers, in our politics, in our pastoral care. God is not an extension of our need, our authority, our sensibilities. God is God. Jesus is Jesus. He is Lord. That’s the point and we keep forgetting it.

Martha, let Mary be Mary and let Jesus be Jesus. Don’t try to make either of them fulfil your needs.

Then Jesus gets to the nub of the problem for Martha. Stress and distraction. Martha had done a great job. The dinner was great. The guests are well cared for. But still she is working, planning tomorrow’s meal, arranging the dishes, sorting the beds. I doubt anyone in this room can relate to that at all. No?

It had to be perfect, better than OK. She had to be in charge. She had to get everything sorted before she could rest.

But yet she longed to rest, so so wanted to sit where Mary was sitting. Of course she did. But she wouldn’t let herself. Too much to do.

Jesus cuts through to the heart:

*Martha, Martha, you’re distracted by so many things. You’re missing the most important thing. Leave Mary be, she’s fine here with me.*

So what happened then?

Did Martha rush back to her kitchen fuming at being told off and shamed in front of all her guests, now even more angry with Mary for being teacher’s pet and lazy to boot!

No, I don’t think so.

I think, I think that she said to Jesus *‘Tell me, Lord. Tell me what the one thing is that is most important. Anything, I’ll do it!’*

And in my imagination Jesus laughs at her, most rudely, and most affectionately, and says again, *“Martha, Martha, it’s not a ‘what’ it’s a who! The one thing is not a thing at all. It’s a relationship. It’s just me, silly. I’m here. Sit with me.”*

In my imagination Martha realises that the point of hospitality is not the cleanliness of the plates but the people gathered. She realises that what we can do for Jesus matters less than appreciating his presence. She realised that she was so busy doing that she missed the main thing – Jesus was in her home.

Mary and Martha

Being and Doing

Work and study

Stress and rest

Mission and contemplation

These are the binary pairs that mark out our lives, especially for us women. Maybe for men too, I can’t talk for you men. I can say that as a women I live with Jesus words every day. I have lived with them every day of my adult life as I have done my best to follow Jesus every day in every way. I hear him say *‘Silvia, Silvia, you are worried and distracted by many things. Only one thing is needed.’*

I lived that as a young mother, with 3 hungry messy demanding little boys as I did a counselling diploma and then a theology degree. I would sit in class with the ordination students deep in discussion about scripture and mission and then I would rush off to pick up boys from child care and school and change nappies and feed them before the evening hunger melt downs. Lucky for me Chris was very much in it with me and he’d be lighting the fire and unpacking lunchboxes. And mostly we loved it and they were good years but gosh we worked hard. And just occasionally there would be a quiet moment or 5 minutes of worship on a Sunday morning and I would feel that maybe just maybe I did know what Jesus meant when he said that only one thing is needed.

I have learned to sit and be still in the presence of Jesus, though that has not always sat comfortably with all that needs to be done.

Being and doing. How do you hold these together?

Work and rest. How do you honour both of these?

I firmly believe that it’s not either-or. None of us are either Mary or Martha.

We get to be both. Actually, they were them. We get to be who we are. You are just who you are, and Jesus knows you and Jesus loves you. He knows your every worry, every distraction, He knows. He knows you in the quiet spaces. He draws you aside and sits close with you and speaks to you quietly about how precious you are to him. You probably miss it most of the time, but he’s reaching out and drawing you in all the time.

Hear him speak your name. Hear him invite you to sit with him.

Come in, relax with me. Stop working for a moment. Stop worrying. Be fully present. Be here. Now.

Martha and Mary, learning to listen. Both treasured by Jesus. As are you.