

“Jesus In The House”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
Proper 11 - July 20, 2025
Amos 8:1-12, Psalm 52, Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:38-42

Jesus was in the house.

And when Jesus was in the house, it was important to pay attention.

When Jesus was in the house, sins were forgiven.

When Jesus was in the house, people got healed.

When Jesus was in the house, miracles happened.

When Jesus was in the house, the dead returned to life.

If Jesus came to your house, you would, of course, show him hospitality, provide food, ensure that he and his disciples were well cared for. Even Zacchaeus knew that!

And, if Jesus was in your house, you really should be listening.

Jesus came to Martha’s house, and she welcomed him, offering food and hospitality to him and his disciples. She served him by her actions, taking on duties that would have been assumed by the male head of the household, had there been one.

And Mary turned her full attention on Jesus, daring to sit at his feet and listen to his teaching, taking on a role that would only have been intended for men.

All the Martha’s of the world, and I count myself among them, struggle with this story.

We know that Jesus values service – we just heard the story of the Good Samaritan last week in which Jesus tells his listeners to go and do likewise, caring for those who had no care. We know that Jesus has been calling disciples to follow him, not just sit quietly somewhere and pray. And we know that while all the men were sitting and listening to Jesus, the women would have been the ones making sure that dinner happened.

Do not fret, Marthas. Jesus isn't suggesting that your work is unimportant or unappreciated. In fact, the traditional interpretation of this story is the need for both action and contemplation. In the 1500s, St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have Him always present and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat. How would Mary, always seated at His feet, provide Him with food if her sister did not help her?" She also talked about the Lord "walking among the pots and pans and said, "let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have this strength to serve."

Martha and Mary must join together. Contemplation must lead to action, and action must be grounded in prayer. Sitting around having a personal relationship with God doesn't do much to put food in the bellies of our neighbors or clothes on their backs. We might wind up like the people of Israel in the story from Amos with God not speaking to us because we are trampling those in need, bringing ruin to the poor, and serving only ourselves, not others.

On the other hand, without spending time listening to Jesus, like Mary, our activity can become relentless and draining, ungrounded in our spiritual lives. We may become exhausted and resentful, giving of ourselves until we drop, but angry and frustrated by our work. I think it is Martha's resentfulness, worry, and distraction, plus blaming it on her sister, that Jesus is actually pointing out as problematic, not her willingness to serve others and show hospitality.

As part of my seminary training, I did a unit of CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, in which we got to practice being chaplains. Every morning, we interns led a short worship service and once a week each of us gave a homily. One day I used this story of Mary and Martha as my text. I made similar points as those I'm making here, and I basically concluded that this story is about finding a balance between action and contemplation in our spiritual lives and quoted the bits from St. Teresa. For once, I felt pretty confident about what I had said.

My supervisor turned to me in our reflection group afterwards and said, "Well, yes, that is a classic interpretation of the text. But why do you think Jesus said that Mary has chosen the better part?"

I was stunned and wanted to protest, but it's right there in the text. I've been thinking about his question ever since. I still think that Mary and Martha must be joined together and that the life of prayer must feed the life of service and vice versa. And I definitely want Jesus to praise the Marthas for all their frantic activity, even when it causes them to be worried and distracted, instead of serving with a spirit of joy. I want Martha to get the pat on the back that she deserves. And, I have to acknowledge that Jesus said Mary had chosen the better part and that it wouldn't be taken from her.

It is by stopping and listening to the Word of God that we learn what service we're called to do. Mary took her place at the feet of Jesus and listened. She claimed a place that women normally couldn't have. She had the courage to remain there even when her own sister threw it up in her face that she wasn't being productive enough, wasn't helping her sister as she should have been. We don't know from the story what fruit was born from Mary's listening. Maybe she felt called into some sort of service that gave her joy. Maybe she learned from Jesus how she might spread the gospel. Maybe she didn't DO anything but instead BECAME something new.

Mary isn't the only one in the story who stops and is still. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is marching toward his death. And yet, he makes time to stop for a visit with his friends. If anyone should have been worried and distracted, you would think it would be Jesus. He was on his way to the cross. But he stayed completely present to those who were with him. And we know that he spent time sitting in the presence of God, his time prayer and contemplation then fueling his ministry.

This is a spirituality that we can practice wherever we are, whatever we are doing. "What matters is not so much what you are doing, but the attentiveness to God's presence and purpose in all our varied activities and responsibilities."

Why did Jesus say that Mary chose the better part? Because Jesus was in the house. And when Jesus is in the house, the focus shouldn't be on worry and distraction, or resentment about how we're the ones doing all the work. The focus should be on Jesus.

When Jesus is in the house, we need to listen closely.

When Jesus is in the house, we need to pay attention so we can also learn how to bring good news to the poor, sight to those who those who do not understand, to release the captives and free the oppressed.

When Jesus is in the house, we need to focus on him.

Friends, Jesus is in the house. Jesus is always in the house.