

You know what? I don't think I like this story. Here's Jesus roaming around the countryside, and his old friend Martha welcomes him into her home. She's the one who meets him at the door and brings him in, plops him down on the couch, and tells him to put his feet up and rest a while. Then she goes back to busying herself trying to keep the house running, maybe working on some project that'll feed the family or slapping together some finger sandwiches for the homeless Messiah in the next room. Meanwhile, her sister Mary, who never seems to do much of anything at all, strolls in and sits at Jesus' feet. Martha asks Jesus to get her to actually do something for once and give her a hand, and Jesus says Martha's wrong. Mary's the one doing the right thing. Here's what gets me. Martha's doing everything right. And Mary kinda gets away with being a lazybones. At least, this is how my grandma would've seen the situation. Don't get me wrong, she never would've contradicted Jesus, but she absolutely could not abide a layabout. Ironically, my grandma's name was Mary. What Martha was doing was all the stuff that piles up when you run a house. Laundry, maybe, or cooking or cleaning or replacing the oil in the lamps or watering the garden or repairing a squeaky door. If they'd had water heaters or automatic garage doors, you better believe she'd tinker with them, too. The issue, though, isn't that Martha shouldn't be taking care of the household. It's that she can't find time, can't make time, won't take time to stop and catch her breath and see the holiness sitting in the next room. Mary, of course, can. And that's why she gets the better part.

But I think it goes deeper than that. I don't think this story teaches us a whole lot if we stop there. Even in our world when finding time to stop is such an impossible task, even now, if we stop here, we end up with a Gospel message that can fit on a motivational poster. Take a breath. Hang in there. Amen. No, I think it's deeper than all of that. Stopping work to recognize the holy, yup, that's good. But the truth is, we don't know if Mary actually did stop work. We don't know if she's taking a break to sit with Jesus. Based off Martha's exasperation -- Jesus, will you make her get off her tuckus for once -- it might be that Mary never does much work. We don't know. But in Martha's case, she's doing and doing and doing. She does and does so much that she stops doing just long enough to open the door and then gets back to doing again. As though the entire house, the entire nation of Israel, the whole daggum Kingdom of God relies on her getting her work done.

And this is where my problem with the story comes in, or at least has come in. Now that I'm getting up to speed, I'm starting to like it a little bit. Martha is doing everything right ... according to the ways of this particular world. Martha does because that's what you do. But in all that doing, she's forgotten or neglected or maybe even lost sight of the most important thing we're supposed to do: have faith. Faith that, come what may, God is with us. Faith that everything will be okay. Faith that the Kingdom of God will be just fine if I take a minute to catch my breath. In other words, Martha just might've gotten a little too big for her spiritual britches. I think I like this story. It flies in the face of the whole idea of the Protestant Work Ethic and reminds us that faith is the thing that matters. All the scrubbing in the world doesn't make me a better Christian, and it doesn't make God love me any more than God already does. Martha missed that. The sparkling cleanliness of your living room, the wallet so fat you have to kinda lean a little to one side, the calloused hands and the aching feet, all that reflects what society expects of us, and none of it makes us better Christians.

I have to say, even though I'm starting to like this story, I really don't like the whole "I'm a Mary" and "I'm a Martha" thing that a lot of us say. I've said it, and I still don't like it. I've known some very industrious Marys and some ne'er do well Marthas (present company excluded, of course). Mostly, we just use it to describe people that either work a lot or pray a lot. But the truth is we're all both of them. We have the urge to prove our worth by working ourselves to the bone or to pat ourselves on the back for a meditation session well-meditated.

And both miss the point. Because being a Martha, is less about production and more about a lack of trust, trust that the world will continue - and God with it - whether or not the oil filter gets changed. And being a Mary is less about stopping work and more about total faith, faith that, in spite of myself and everything I know and do, God's got this. And both of those urges reside in all of us all the time.

Now most of the time, I'm a Martha. (See? I did the thing. I will admit, it is a helpful shorthand.) Most of the time, I'm a Martha -- I work like God's existence depends on me and what I can get done. My To-Do List is sacred and crucial to the continuation of Christ's Body the Church. But when I got sick back in December, I was forced to be a Mary for a long time. And you know what? Christmas went on and happened anyway. And the Wise Men showed up. And Lent came and went. And Easter, too. Shoot, even Colgate had their graduation ceremony without asking me. Several graduations! Can you believe that? The nerve. Really, though, all I could do was read -- and even that I did with the drive of a Martha. It was a very strange thing, y'all, to be forced into faith, total trust, total reliance on other people and God to keep the most basic thing going: me. Mary may have had the better part, but y'all, that better part ain't an easy part. And just as suddenly, since I've come back to work, I've gone right back to being a Martha again. I've buried two folks, attended ten meetings, gone to seven medical appointments, had 5 pastoral conversations, handed out \$100 worth of grocery cards, planned a podcast, walked in a parade, mowed the land twice, walked at least 17 miles over the course of daily walks, tidied around the house anticipating Becca's return, grocery shopped, plant shopped, even ice cream shopped. And you know what? While it's nice to be back at it and it's lovely to catch up with all y'all, nothing about God has changed because of what I'm doing. I know this is gonna sound a little weird, but my medically required daily siesta, that 2:00 pm nap that continues to insist itself into my life, it's not just nice, I think it might actually be the single most important thing I do everyday. Because that's the moment where my body and maybe even my soul demands that my inner workaholic stop doing and trust that the world is gonna be okay even if I fade out of it for an hour or two. And even more so, God is going to be okay. Yeah, I'm beginning to like this story.

One last thing, and then I'll sit down and stop doing, at least for a second. I want to be clear about the things we do as Christians, the ministry type stuff. The Martha urge, I think, is to do do do in order to earn favor or a better seat at the heavenly banquet. But instead, I think it's more helpful to feel the grace and love that comes from basking in God's presence and then do as a response to that. It doesn't earn us anything, but it's a healthy and faithful way to respond to that Kingdom with the recognition that it is every bit the gift we say it is. Back in Little Rock, the Rector at Christ Church used to say that faith is "useless." He knew what he was doing using that word, useless. He wanted to make people's ears perk up. Faith is useless in that it doesn't have a use. It doesn't produce anything, it doesn't have or provide wordly value. And because of that, because it doesn't earn us anything, it is the single most important thing in the universe. It's Mary to the extreme. Be useless! If that makes your skin crawl a little bit, and it certainly did mine the first thirty-two times he said it, that's probably a good thing. That's your inner-Martha fighting back, demanding to be useful. Demanding to be seen because of everything you've done. Demanding to be loved because of all you're worth. But y'all, you are worth everything for no reason. You are loved for no reason. You are seen and held and healed simply because you are and because you are God's. That's Mary, and that's the better part.

I take it all back. I think I love this story.