

Proper 11C Luke 10:38-42 July 20, 2025

A long time ago, when I was a boy,
one of my favorite television shows was Rocky and His Friends.
Among the segments on that show
was Peabody's Improbable History.

Mr. Peabody was a brilliant talking dog,
who had adopted a boy named Sherman.

Mr. Peabody had invented a time travel device
that he called the Way-back Machine,
which he used to visit interesting points in history,
sometimes helping to align what he saw happening
with the way it is now reported in the history books.

If Mr. Peabody were to visit the ancient near east,
he could have seen the beginning of the need
for the cultural imperative of hospitality for the traveler.

Palestine in Biblical times was lightly populated,
with people living far apart.

It was an arid land,
and there was no such thing as 911,
McDonald's, or gas stations.

Bandits were lurking, hoping for easy prey,
and water was a constant concern for the traveler.

It was a matter of the society's survival
for people to show hospitality,
by offering food, water, and shelter
to those who dared travel.

This imperative predates the written Bible,

and was subsequently incorporated
into the list of things that God's people were required to do.

It is in this context
that we should hear today's story of Mary and Martha.

Jesus was traveling with His disciples.
He went to Mary and Martha's home,
and Jesus was invited in,
just as the dictates of hospitality required.

Jesus, of course, was not just a traveler.
He was their friend,
and had made quite a name for Himself
by the cool things He had done.

He was also a guest,
entitled to be treated as one who had been offered hospitality.

One of the things I learned
when I began to live on my own
is that having guests is a lot of work.

There is extra cleaning to be done,
for I wouldn't want anyone to know
just how much of a mess I usually live in.

There is extra food to be purchased and prepared,
there are sleeping arrangements to be made, t
here are meals to be cooked,
and then there is the inevitable cleanup afterward.

These tasks were what Martha was doing by herself.

I imagine that she was getting angrier by the minute,
as she did all the work

of making her guests feel welcomed,
and of seeing to their needs.

And Mary just sat there,
at the feet of Jesus,
the place of a disciple,
listening to what He had to say.

Martha would probably have wanted to be there
at His feet as well,
but her lazy bum of a sister
was leaving her to do all the work,
which, of course, was required by both tradition and scripture,
which were also being ignored by Mary.

We are not told how many times
Martha went to Mary to ask her to help,
but finally, she had had enough.

She went to Jesus,
and asked Him to tell Mary
to get off her butt and do some work.

But Jesus did not do
what we might think equity demanded.

He observed that Martha was
“worried and distracted by many things”.
He added that Mary had chosen the “better part”.

I imagine that Martha would have been surprised and hurt by this comment

After all, Martha was doing
the hard and necessary work of hosting a guest.

The trouble is that she was doing it

in order to assuage her own needs
of being seen as a good host,
of being seen as satisfying the demands of tradition and the commandments.

She was afraid of failing at these tasks,
and Mary's lack of assistance made
failure more likely.

She worked hard in order to quiet the worry,
to dim the distraction.

Martha's soul was noisy in her anger.
She was focusing on herself and her resentment, and not on her guest.

Mary, on the other hand, s
at at the feet of Jesus, her friend and teacher,
listening.

She was in relationship with Jesus,
offering the hospitality of her attention,
even at the risk of alienating her own sister.

The “better part” that Mary chose
was better because Mary's focus was on Jesus.
As she sat at his feet,
in the quiet of her contemplation,
in the stillness of her attention,
she was most open to hearing and absorbing
Jesus' radical vision of reality.

In contrast, Martha's choice was a triumph of form over substance.

She did the work,
but was really serving the demands of her culture,
and not the needs of her guest.

If she had been truly hospitable,
she would have provided for her guest's comfort
without concern over working alone,
without the resentment of feeling taken advantage of,
and without the jealousy
of not being in the immediate company of Jesus.

Both contemplation and activity,
both being and doing, are necessary.

Both will enhance a relationship with God
when they are done with the awareness
of God as a guest worthy of our full hospitality, our full attention.

Jesus has knocked on our door,
seeking hospitality, and we have let Him in.
We can choose the “better part”.

The author of Ecclesiastes tells us that
“to everything there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under heaven”.

With Jesus as our guest,
there is a time to work,
and a time to sit and listen.

Whatever time it is,
remember who is being served.

Amen

- Pete Ruppel