Text: Luke 10:38-42

**Introduction**

This little 5 verse story, Mary and Martha, has vexed church people from the beginning. Because we all jump to Mary and Martha as types, and most of us fall into the Martha type.

**Text**

But Before we jump immediately to the things that vex, let’s spend a bit of time just on the domestic scene itself. The timeline in Luke is a little weird. Before Chapter 9 verse 51 you have the Christmas stories and the Galilean ministry. From 9:51 through roughly chapter 19 you have a travel story. Jesus is travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem towards the cross. And then when they arrive in Jerusalem you have the passion story. It is from the Gospel of John that we get roughly 3 years of the active ministry of Jesus. And Jesus makes multiple trips to Jerusalem. But in Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is just the one. If all you had were the synoptics, the entire story might be one year. So, parts of Luke’s arrangement are thematic, not strictly chronological.

And I think I’d say that about this scene, because Mary and Martha are the sisters of Lazarus, who all live in Bethany, which is just on the outskirts of Jerusalem. So thematically from Luke Jesus is on the way to the cross and he would be very close. Chronologically it couldn’t have been on that last trip, because that is the trip that Jesus came to raise Lazarus from the dead. And Martha and Mary meet Jesus on the road. But Luke is using the story as a counter-weight, or a reminder after the sending of the 70 and the good Samaritan.

Thematically, Jesus has been very active. He’s set his face to go to Jerusalem. He’s sent out the 70 to go to all the villages in front of him proclaiming the message. He’s continued to do the miracles, but he has also taken on all the various lawyers testing him at every stop along the way. As Jesus summarized about his ministry just before sending out those 70, “foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.”

The end of chapter 9 and all of chapter 10 have been about work, effort, doing. Capped off – at least on the surface – with the Good Samaritan. Go and do likewise.

So, when the Son of Man does find a place to rest his head, in the home of his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, what happens? If you’ve been traveling, and you’ve got something big coming up, what do you feel like? Do you want a four course Michelin starred meal with everyone possible, or a hamburger and discussion with friends?

And if you are in the role of host, is your job to do what **you** want to do for your honored guest, or is it more to make your guest at ease?

Jesus, the famous traveling miracle worker, was staying with Martha, and Martha wanted to pull out all the stops. She’s probably got the entire village coming over. And it is for Jesus, but it is also for Martha.

When we get involved in much doing, this is often the way. Yes, we are doing because we think it is what will honor our guest, Jesus. And to be fair, it usually does. Jesus doesn’t tell Martha that what she is doing is bad. But we should also be honest, we are doing it also because of our anxieties, and troubles and needs. Jesus tells Martha she is “troubled about many things.” Martha as host was thinking about her troubles, and not her guest’s troubles. When we set out to do we are usually thinking about our troubles, and not the needs of the Kingdom.

In the scene itself, Martha is overwhelmed by the work involved in everything she wanted to do for the LORD. And she wants the messiah to tell her sister to get busy on her project. But Jesus won’t do that, because Martha’s project is not the kingdom project. It isn’t even the best way to honor their guest. Mary has chosen better in both.

**Application**

Now, stepping out of the specific scene, Mary and Martha **are** typically read as symbols or types of life. The active life and the contemplative life. Think of the active life as the moral crusader and the contemplative life as prayer and meditation. Our world has a strong tilt to the Martha lifestyle. Its sneers at “thoughts and prayers”. It has little use for time for thought – no justice now, no peace now. But as Jesus says “we are anxious and troubled about many things.” And as in the scene itself, our active lives are not always kingdom directed as much as aimlessly acting out our own troubles. Troubles that have not been contemplated first. Troubles that have not been understood by even ourselves.

Now there are some false conclusions here. We’ve all heard Mary and Martha used as an excuse to not do. And it is usually cited by someone who you don’t find at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching contemplating every word. Such a response that neither is troubled about many things, even if those things are not exactly Kingdom directed, nor engaged in contemplation of the kingdom, is worse than either the Martha or Mary. The contradiction between the natural law and what we see should cause anxiety. Anxiety over a just God if nothing else. Being neither in the Word, nor attempting to live it as you understand it, is not even in the house. I think Jesus would say go back and listen to the Good Samaritan.

There is also the false conclusion that Mary – the contemplative life – is everything. We run into this type that loves to study and discuss and ponder and debate – and to be known to do that – and yet it never impacts how they live. Other than taking up all their waking hours. And I say this because Mary’s contemplation is also part action. Her sitting at the feet of Jesus listening, is also exactly what the Son of Man needed. That place to rest his head. The way of the Kingdom is often like that. The contemplative life – experiencing God – also seems to be the active – God’s will is done. The law says do this and it is never done; the gospel says hear this and everything is finished.

We rush to compare Mary and Martha, and there is a comparison. Jesus does say that Mary “has chosen the good part.” But instead of an either/or, I’d encourage you to take the comparison as an ordering. Action without contemplation is usually just acting out our anxiety and troubles. And sometimes, throwing stuff on the wall and seeing what sticks might be the only think we have. But the good portion, what Mary chose, was to experience God. You can chide me for citing a Reformed catechism in a Lutheran pulpit, but the first question of Westminster catechism asks: What is the chief end of man? And it answers: Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. The Westminster Catechism gets to point of what Mary has chosen.

The active life has its place. Jesus sent out 70 and he himself is on the way to Jerusalem on His father’s mission. Go an do likewise hovers in the background. But the doing is only rightly ordered by the gospel. The doing is only rightly ordered when it is to glorify God and enjoy him. Which is what Mary has chosen at this moment. She is giving the messiah on the way to the cross her ears. She is giving him a place to lay his head. And she is giving him a shelter. And she is doing this because Jesus is the messiah.

**Conclusion**

There really isn’t a contradiction between the active and the contemplative life. That is just more of our troubles. We don’t trust God enough. Or worse, maybe we don’t enjoy his company.

But the good life, the good action, is ordered by the love of God. God’s will certain happens without our internal Martha’s, we pray that it would happen with us. We pray that we would choose the good part. Amen.