

At the Feet of Jesus
Sermon by Lori Erickson
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Those of you who are on the New Song preaching roster are all-too-familiar with that sinking feeling you get when you realize the readings for the day range between impenetrable and strange. You might remember the assortment that Bill Kupersmith had to deal with a few weeks ago, for example, which had circumcision, snakes, scorpions and demons.

I actually have the opposite problem this morning, in that all of the scriptures assigned for today provide a host of insights. Which one should I focus on? In the reading from Genesis, the Lord appears to Abraham in the form of three angels, who promise that his aged wife Sarah will bear a son. The reading from Colossians is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture, a beautiful passage that was likely one of the first hymns used by the early Christian churches.

And then there's the reading from Luke, which is *also* one of my favorite passages. In it Jesus tells Mary that it's just fine to sit at his feet and listen and that Martha shouldn't be so concerned with housework. I've never had the chance to preach about this story, which makes it doubly appealing.

So let's dive in, shall we? And maybe I can find some connections between all three of these rich passages.

Let's begin with the story from Luke. I've heard a number of sermons through the years on this text, and the general consensus seems to be that most people identify with Martha. Not me: I'm in Mary's camp. That's partly because I was the youngest of three children, and when I was young I was very good at getting out of work. I would try to disappear just when dishes needed to be washed or farm chores needed to be done. When my brother and sister objected, my mother would often shrug and say, "Well, with Lori you just try to hit the high spots." I took this as a compliment, though I guess you can interpret it in various ways.

And so I identify with Mary in this story—and also with the poet Emily Dickinson, who said that "Consider the lilies" is the only commandment she ever obeyed. If she would have been there with Jesus, I think she would have been sitting at his feet too, instead of working in the kitchen.

But Mary wasn't just a slacker, of course. Instead she was focused on Jesus. From our perspective in the 21st century, it's easy to miss how revolutionary her behavior was. During this time period, *male* students would sit at the feet of a rabbi, but not female ones. But there Mary was, proclaiming her right to be in the inner circle.

And then there's Martha. Poor Martha. In one sense she's perfectly justified in complaining about her sister. She was doing all the work in hosting important guests, while Mary just sat there. It should come as no surprise that in the Catholic Church, Martha is the patron saint of cooks, homemakers, and restaurant servers, and Martha, Mary, and Lazarus are the patron

saints of siblings. You can recognize their complicated dynamics, can't you? It's clear that sibling relationships haven't changed that much in 2,000 years.

But setting aside those sibling issues, Jesus instead focuses on Martha alone. "Martha, Martha," he says, and the repetition of her name gives us a sense for his rueful tone, "you are worried and distracted by many things." And maybe that gets to the heart of his gentle chiding of her. This isn't the only time in the Gospels when he rebukes people for worrying. It's a common theme in his teachings, in fact.

In the book of Matthew, for example, he says, "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you'll eat or drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ... Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Or as the old saying goes: Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but it doesn't get you anywhere.

Maybe part of what Jesus was chiding Martha about was that in her worry, she wasn't focusing on either him or her other guests. Hospitality was of utmost importance in the Biblical world, as we see in the story from Genesis in which Abraham welcomes three unknown men to his encampment. Abraham is a model for how to welcome a stranger. And he's amply rewarded, too, in that the angels bring him the best possible news that he will have a much-longed for child. This story is related to a wonderful verse that comes later the Bible, in Hebrews, which says that we should be welcoming of strangers, for some have entertained angels unawares.

So getting back to Martha, it's clear that the best hosts, in the Biblical world and today, are the ones who don't fuss about the details. Instead they focus on their guests. Because you never know who's going to show up at your door, including angels and/or the Messiah.

It's interesting, too, to ponder what Mary was thinking about as she sat at the feet of Jesus. The story certainly implies that she was fully **there**, fully present, not thinking about the past or the future but instead savoring the gift of being in Jesus' presence. She makes me think of another Mary in the Bible: Mary the mother of Jesus, who in the Nativity story is said to have seen the miraculous things that were happening all around her and then "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."

I think one of the messages from both Marys is that while the impulse is always to **do**, sometimes the best response is to **be**. Especially in relation to God.

Which brings me to the reading from Colossians, which in some ways doesn't seem to have a clear connection to the other two passages. Why would the compilers of the lectionary put these three together? Perhaps the link is a connection to Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus,

where she contemplated what he was about. Who is this Jesus who speaks with authority and works miracles?

The reading from Colossians is one answer to this question. To me it sounds like a passage that is the fruit of deep contemplation, savored and ruminated upon for many years. Let me read it again, partly because I think the language is some of the most beautiful in the Bible.

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.

Now not everyone shares my high opinion of this passage, I realize. Bob told me once that he didn't like it because it doesn't make much sense, at which point I got a little huffy and defended it at some length. But I know what he meant—it's not easy to understand. I think it's best read as poetry, not theology, because it hints of mystery and has a kind of shimmer about it, like an icon in an Eastern Orthodox church. And like an icon, it's meant to be a window into the divine, a passageway into something that we can't understand with just our rational minds.

To me it's the sort of passage that was probably written by someone who had sat for a long time at the feet of Jesus, either literally or figuratively. Who knows, maybe it even came from Mary herself. It's an attempt to describe the indescribable, to convey insights that work at a soul level, not just at the surface.

So there you go. Three passages rich with meaning, each worthy of sermons devoted just to them. But I like thinking of the connections between them, between hospitality and worry and contemplation. Be kind to strangers. Don't worry so much. Focus on what's most important in life. And when Jesus enters your house—or your mind—grab a pillow and sit at his feet. The dishes can wait.