
Why Does Jesus Get Between Two Sisters Fighting?

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
July 17, 2016

“Martha had a sister named Mary...”

This week in the Marsh house baby Cyrus turns one. It is a big event because we are witnessing a new dynamic as Cyrus and his three-year-old brother, Bradford, have started to become friends and rivals. The moments of friendship are heartwarming, and the moments of rivalry are downright scary.

There are days where our living room rug resembles a World Cup soccer match, where one small touch or accidental bump sends the other player falling to the floor screaming injury and foul play. For better or worse, the sibling dynamic is alive in our house and it will be for the rest of our lives.

My mother says, “It doesn’t matter how many years have passed, the type of education we have received, or the careers we have chosen, or the fact we are now married with children, because when my sister and I sit around the kitchen table the dynamics remain the same.”

Think about the last time your family gathered for a wedding, funeral, or serious health crisis. I imagine that some form of sibling dynamic was at play.

Understanding sibling dynamics is important because today’s gospel is about two sisters in the midst of a conflict, and Jesus does something no one should do; he enters the family conflict and starts taking sides.

What is Jesus thinking? What is so important that you would put yourself between two sisters fighting?

Both sisters are standing on solid ground. Martha prioritizes excellence and hospitality, while Mary emphasizes the importance of grace.

Martha’s emphasis on hospitality is based upon the Hebrew Scriptures.

For example, Genesis 18 is about the story of Abraham and Sarah showing hospitality to the three strangers. Genesis 43 is about Joseph showing hospitality to the brothers who left him for dead. Exodus 2 is the story of Moses, fleeing from Pharaoh after killing the Egyptian soldier, and receiving hospitality from a priest in Midian. Then, there is the famous story in Joshua 2, where Israelite soldiers sneak into Jericho and receive hospitality from Rahab, the prostitute.

Martha also knows that Jesus talks about hospitality in his teaching.

Last week, we heard about the Good Samaritan providing hospitality to the stranger. A few weeks ago, we heard the story of the sinful woman who washed Jesus’ feet with an expensive oil (Luke 7:36); she took hospitality to an extreme. Later in Luke’s gospel we encounter Zacchaeus up in a tree, and Jesus says, come down for I must stay at your house today (Luke 19:1-9). Zacchaeus extends hospitality and his life is changed.

Martha is trying to practice the virtue of hospitality, and believes Mary should do the same.

And then there is Mary. She grew up in the same home as Martha, heard the same scriptures, but gravitates toward grace. She hears the Psalm, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10), and sits at Jesus’ feet. It is possible Mary heard the words, “Come to me all you / that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28), so she sat and listened.

Maybe the conversation at this table was similar to the one in John’s gospel, where Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). Mary is drawn to the grace of Christ so she stops to listen.

Both Martha and Mary are justified in their positions, so why does Jesus say Mary has chosen the better part? And what does it mean for us today?

It comes down to the fact that Martha has separated excellence and hospitality from God; she loses sight of the most important thing. Providing excellence and hospitality involve being a servant, and being a servant involves being in relationship with the greatest servant of all; it involves drawing nourishment from the grace of Christ.

The Cathedral has three words that Dean Candler uses over and over again—Grace, Excellence, and Hospitality. These are the Cathedral’s guiding principles and they play out in today’s gospel. Martha is about excellence and hospitality, and Mary is about grace.

We all know it has been a crazy week in Atlanta and in the world. Earlier this week, our neighborhood was filled with protestors. Like Martha, they were anxiously marching in order to create a community of excellence and hospitality.

Globally, we have witnessed another act of terrorism with rising instability in the Middle East. The Marthas have reason to be anxious as hospitable communities are being threatened.

The Marys are looking out upon our community and the world wanting us to sit at the feet of Jesus and receive the message of grace, along with a peace that passes all understanding.

I get where both the Marthas and Marys are coming from, but trust me, it won’t be long before these two sisters start fighting. Here is how things will ultimately play out. The Marthas will eventually run out of gas, and the Marys will never seem to get anything done. That is why Jesus gets into the middle of the argument between these two sisters. Jesus wants us to see that all three are needed: grace, excellence, and hospitality.

If you look at the history of Christianity, you will see that communities of grace, excellence, and hospitality have a way of changing the world.

The disciples knew that in order for Christianity to spread it was going to take more than just preaching, so they created *koinonia*, a community of grace, excellence, and hospitality. The church began to grow.

Atlanta’s own Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that in order for segregation to end, he needed more than just protest, so he cast a vision for *Beloved Community*, a community grounded in grace, excellence, and hospitality. It gave shape to the Civil Rights Movement.

In the midst of Nazi Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged the German Church to articulate something more than a theology of grace; Bonhoeffer challenged them to become a church grounded in grace, excellence, and hospitality.

That is why Jesus gets in the middle of the fight between these two sisters. There is something important at stake. There is something we can learn from them to change our current situation. We can create communities based upon grace, excellence and hospitality.

Like Martha and Mary, we are called to bring these values into our homes, to make them a part of who we are and how we treat others. We are called to bring these values into the classroom, our offices, and in our social circles.

The Cathedral of St. Philip strives to be a community of grace, excellence, and hospitality. We invite you to live by those values and spread them to Atlanta and the world, because we live in a moment in time where all three are needed—Grace, Excellence, and Hospitality.

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