

THE BETTER PART
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Genesis 18:1-10a

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Poor Martha. She's in the kitchen, running around like crazy, getting supper ready, while her sister, Mary, hangs out in the living room with Jesus. And when she finally gets fed up and asks for some help, the response she gets from Jesus isn't exactly sympathetic. He tells her she's distracted and worried about many things, when there's only one thing that really matters. "Mary has chosen the better part," he says.

So the whole story hinges on whatever it is Jesus means by that—whatever it is Mary has chosen and Martha apparently has not. And at first it seems pretty clear that Jesus is talking about the way Mary shoves everything else aside and plants herself right in front of him and listens to every word he says. It seems pretty clear that that’s “the better part”—focusing entirely on Jesus and his teachings vs. letting other things pull your attention away.

If that’s the case, then this whole story really boils down to a simple dichotomy. On the one hand, there’s Mary, the good disciple, the one who prioritizes Jesus above all else. On the other hand, there’s Martha, the bad disciple, the one who focuses on her chores instead of her faith. And it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what we’re supposed to take from that, as Christians. We should be like Mary, not Martha. We should be good disciples, who put Jesus first, not bad disciples, who let something as insignificant as housework get in the way.

That’s how people usually read this passage. That’s kind of the standard interpretation. But the more I think about it, the more I wonder if maybe “the better part” is actually something a little deeper.

The first clue we have about that is the fact that what Martha’s doing isn’t something trivial. She’s not sitting around scrolling through FaceBook. She’s taking care of her guest. She’s offering Jesus hospitality, which was a big deal in her day. It was a cultural value, and the importance of it even shows up in scripture, like we see in the first reading.

Abraham is sitting in front of his tent when three men suddenly appear. And these aren’t ordinary human beings, but Abraham doesn’t know that. As far as he’s concerned, they’re just strangers passing through. And yet, look at how he welcomes them. He drops everything and runs to meet them, he bows down to the ground, and he invites them to stay for a meal. Then he goes and prepares, not just some snacks, not just some chips and salsa, but a feast: cakes made from choice flour, a nice tender calf hand-picked from the herd, and some milk with curds to wash it all down.

I’m getting hungry just thinking about it.

So the idea that Martha is somehow an inferior disciple because she’s doing stuff that doesn’t matter instead of focusing a hundred percent on Jesus doesn’t hold water—not in the context of first century Palestinian life. In her own way, Martha is extremely focused on Jesus. She’s doing all this work because of Jesus. And in her world, that work does matter. It matters deeply. She’s honoring Jesus in the same way Abraham honored his three visitors—by rolling out the red carpet.

But there’s one key difference between Abraham and Martha. There’s one thing that sets them apart. Abraham seems genuinely excited about showing hospitality. He

seems practically giddy as he sets the food down in front of his guests and then stands there watching them eat it. He seems like he's getting real satisfaction out of it. Martha, on the other hand—not so much. She feels like she's getting the short end of the stick, and she's not happy about it. She comes stomping over Jesus, interrupts him, and says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

And notice that this is when Jesus gives her the speech about choosing the better part—after she flies off the handle—which I think is really important for understanding this story. I think it's the key that unlocks the whole thing. Notice that Jesus doesn't say a word to Martha the whole time she's out in the kitchen. *Not one word.* Which tells me he doesn't have a problem with it. She's doing what you do when you have company. She's being a good host.

It's only when Martha gets upset, when she loses her temper, when she starts feeling resentful, when her mind becomes clouded with all these negative feelings, that Jesus tells her she's focused on the wrong things, and she's missing out what's vital, what's life-giving. She's missing out on this moment when he's there with her, and she has the opportunity to show her love for him in a way that's authentic, in a way that's uniquely her own, in a way that comes from her heart. She's missing out on the chance to let her hospitality be more than just a chore, but a true offering of herself.

That, in my opinion, is "the better part." It's not about simple dichotomies. It's not about whether we're good disciples or bad disciples. It's about figuring out who we are and what we're passionate about. It's about discovering the gifts we have to give. It's about living into our deepest, most generous selves. And it's about bringing all of that into our relationship with God, where it can find its fullest expression in loving our neighbors, doing justice, caring for creation, building community, establishing peace, offering worship, and all the other ways we're called to live our faith as God's people.

So if Martha's guilty of anything, it's falling into the same trap we all fall into sometimes, as church members. We give our time, and our energy, and our creativity. We join committees. We volunteer for things. We take on responsibilities. And even though it's meaningful work, and we get a lot of satisfaction out of it, we're only human, and sometimes we get tired, and before we know it, the things we used to look forward to start feeling like burdens, and we start resenting them.

So we need to remember that serving God is supposed to bring us joy, and when it no longer does, we need to pay attention to that. Maybe it's time to step back. Maybe it's time try something different. Maybe God is calling us to use our gifts in some other way.

I think if Martha had remembered that and paid more attention to her feelings, this would've been a very different story. Maybe she would've kept doing what she was doing but found new purpose in it, like Abraham. Or maybe she would've turned off the oven, ordered a pizza, and sat down in the living room next to Mary. Who knows? But either way, she would've been choosing the better part. Amen.