

## **Mary, Martha, and a Bowl of Fruit**

A sermon offered by Ruth Hopkins  
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

### **Amos 8:1-12**

*This is what the Lord GOD showed me-- a basket of summer fruit. He said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord GOD; "the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!" Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?*

*We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat."*

*The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.*

*Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it,*

*and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?*

*On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.*

*The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.*

*They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east;*

*they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.*

### **Psalm 52**

#### **Luke 10:38-42**

*As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus 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."*

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In today's readings we have three major characters, Mary, Martha, and a bowl of fruit. Let's take them one at a time.

First there is Mary. Jesus has come with his disciples for a visit to Mary and Martha's house. Mary, instead of helping Martha, sits with Jesus' disciples.

Then we have Martha. Martha, Martha, Martha. So distracted by serving the guests, so busy working that she won't sit down and take some time to listen to Jesus.

We'll get to the fruit later.

The story of Mary and Martha is a familiar one, and like the Good Samaritan, has often been interpreted roughly the same way over the years. Mary represents the contemplative life, full of study and prayer; Martha represents the worldier, active life, the perfect homemaker. During the Reformation, Mary represented the bold new church of grace by faith alone, while poor Martha represented the old Catholic church of grace by works. Whatever the comparison, most take Mary's side over Martha's.

When we read this story, we tend to side with Mary as well. After all, if Jesus visited your house you would certainly want to sit and listen to every word he said, wouldn't you? Or would you be the one flying around the house, plumping pillows, and garnishing the vegetable platter? We'd like to think we'd all be little Marys, sitting and listening to Jesus, ordering take out so we don't have to miss a moment. No Marthas, no one likes her.

Those of us who are more Martha-ish get riled at this. Somebody has to be the one in the kitchen checking the roast while the rest of the guests mingle with their cocktails. Someone has to plump the pillows, and take the coats, and freshen the guest towels. We all can't sit around like Marys, or there will be no dinner at all.

I once dated a Martha man. He alphabetized his grocery coupons. No kidding. He had a special system, of course, and Sunday mornings he would sit with his scissors and cut coupons and file them in his coupon folder. I offered to help but his special system was beyond me. A Tide coupon was filed under T for Tide, but a Jiffy peanut butter coupon was filed under P for, yes, peanut butter. Going grocery shopping with him was a military drill. He even took over bagging so he could put things away more efficiently.

I suspect we all have our Martha ways, according to this view of Martha, as the little homemaker, the Betty Crocker of the Bible. Just as we have our Mary ways, those

times when we let the day-to-day work go, get caught up in a book with a cup of tea on a rainy day.

That balance is good. We do need people to both tend the hearth, and earn the bread, whatever gender. We need people that pray for us in a quiet monastery in France, and people who work to rebuild a home in New Orleans. We can't all be Marys, we can't all be Marthas.

And while Martha has this domestic goddess reputation stuck to her, she was fulfilling an important role. The writer of Luke may have been writing about his time, the time of the first Christians a century after Jesus' death. The early church depended on wealthy women to house their traveling evangelists. These women housed apostles like Peter and Paul, and were considered leaders in the Christian community. The traveling evangelists taught everyone in the household, and that household then taught the rest of the church community.

In this light, Martha can be seen as more than just a servile woman. But Martha is distracted by the meal, and the many dishes she has prepared. And she is mad that Mary, her sister, will not help her.

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Lord, do you not care? Tell her then to help me.

Wow, Martha. She doesn't pull Mary over to her and say, look sis, I could use some help. No, she tells Jesus about it, and with plenty of guilt on the side. Don't you care that I am here, fulfilling my role and Mary is not? You're the teacher, do something!

Mary was sitting with the other disciples. Like a man. Even though she was the hostess in the home with Martha, even though her place was serving others, she decided that listening to Jesus was more important than getting an elaborate meal on

the table. Martha wanted to show her love and hospitality by spreading a feast. Mary wanted the feast of Jesus' words.

Jesus replies to Martha's guilt trip very simply. "Martha, you are distracted by many things. but there is need of only one thing." What's he talking about?

Some think he was simply talking about the number of meals. Just serve one dish, Martha, and come sit and listen with Mary. This seems like a pretty good explanation. But then he goes on, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." We are not talking about meals anymore.

I think we are talking about fruit. Amos' summer fruit. Remember Amos and his bowl of fruit? Summer fruit. Fruit that has reached its peak, ready for eating, but soon.

Amos was telling Israel it was a bowl of fruit, beautiful now, perfectly satisfying, but almost ready to rot. Israel was a nation filled with injustice, once nourishing and life giving, but now past its prime. Israel is rotting from within and will be in exile soon. And, like fruit past its prime, there is no stopping it. Once fruit has started to rot, there is nothing to do but toss it.

Those Marthas out there that do the grocery shopping and cooking know those moments when you assess your fruits. The tomatoes are getting softer; maybe they have one more day. The peaches are almost too ripe; need to eat those tonight, maybe a cobbler? The bananas are too brown to even freeze for smoothies later, toss them.

Fruit does not last. Its joys are fleeting. It reaches a state of perfect ripeness, and our job is to eat it at that time. When we eat it too early, it tastes funny, when we leave it to rot, we can't eat it at all. Fruit- is all about timing.

Maybe Mary was more like Martha that we first thought. She was assessing the fruit in her life. Here is this intriguing man, challenging everything she ever thought. He upset the authorities. Now he's in her house, and she's going to listen to him while she can. Like a piece of perfectly ripe fruit, Mary made her choice based on timing.

I remember reading Rabbi Kula's book Yearnings for a seminary class a few years ago. It moved me so much that I gave it to Pastor Mike; he loved it as much as I did, and we ended up basing a Lenten season around it. When the seminary offered a wisdom class with Rabbi Kula, I signed up at once. It wasn't required for graduation, and many of my classmates asked me, "why in the world are you wasting a credit, you could be taking a required course and finish earlier."

Finish earlier to graduate earlier to work earlier to retire earlier?

I had to take that class. Something Maryish in me said, there is wisdom here for you – don't pass this one up. The class opened me up to a new world. I had to reach for the fruit when it was ripe. This fruit continues to nourish me, long after the class is over.

Picking the fruit, eating the ripe peach when it is ready, often requires that other things be set aside. Somehow the day-to-day work must get done, but often we get so engrossed in it, and attach so much importance to it, get so distracted by it, that we miss our ripening fruit.

So many moments in life are like perfect pieces of ripe fruit. They give us a small window of opportunity for tasting, but provide a lifetime of nourishment for the soul. Catching a beautiful sunrise, seeing a baby's first smile, the first time you said "I love you", these are the images and memories that burn into our brains and hearts. Perishable, brief moments that keep us loving long after the moments pass.

Mary would remember Jesus, sitting with him, listening to him long after the table was cleared and the guests gone. She would continue to thrive on that fruit the rest of her life. Her witness to the rest of the disciples, her story today, continues to nourish us.

Mary chose the one thing. That one piece of fruit, fully ripe, ready to be savored, ready to bring nourishment.

We can choose. We can reach for the ripe fruit of our lives and savor each juicy bite. Because the dust bunnies will keep, the juicy fruits of life will not.