

“Handle with Care: Share the Load!”

Romans 12:3-8; Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16; Luke 10:38-42 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might follow the Spirit's guidance through seasons of toil and rest, trusting that the many members will keep the body going. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

It's just five verses long, which may be part of the problem. The story of Mary and Martha only appears in Luke's gospel, which may be another part of the problem. What is the problem? Well, maybe there's more than one. Part of the problem is that for many faithful church folks – you know, the ones who show up to do the work – this story can feel a little bit like Jesus is being unfair. Another part of the problem is that it can seem like Jesus is making the work of hospitality invisible or underestimating it – as if the food was going to cook itself and the table set itself – which particularly stings because that work is largely done by women. But perhaps the biggest problem is that these complications often manage to overshadow the rather radical thing Jesus is most intentionally doing, which is declaring that women are not just relegated to the kitchen, but also belong in the seats of learning and study and discourse.

If only we had more details about this story! If only we had the perspective of other gospels, which might have come at it from other angles. But what we have

instead in the incredibly familiarity that lives deep in our gut with that accusation disguised as a question that Martha simply can't help but express: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." We've seen that dynamic; we've lived that dynamic, whether we were the one wearily pointing out others' lack of involvement or the ones who chose to do other things. We may not have much detail about this little story from Luke, but our life experience easily fills in the gaps.

I am one of the people who usually approach this story with the assumption that Martha got a bum rap. Jesus was there, which presumably meant the whole band of disciples was there too. You don't just pull something out of the cupboard to feed a crowd like that. There may have been furniture to rearrange to make sure there was room for everyone to sleep. Who knows how many dirty dishes may have already piled up by the time Martha vented her frustration? It was a lot.

For Jesus to say that she's worrying about unimportant things had to feel dismissive. For him to reject her appeal for help must have hurt. Is there some redemptive, unwritten happier ending to this story, where they all got up and moved the conversation into the kitchen so everyone could hear and everyone could pitch in at the same time?

The truth is that the impact of this story is much heavier than its five verses would predict, because it's describing a dynamic that has existed within the church for

centuries. The church is called to be a community of study and prayer and worship. And for such a community to be sustained, the people involved must have their bodily needs looked after, with meals and rest and all the rest. These are two very different ways of spending our time and our talents. Both are necessary; the question is whether one is “better” than the other, the way Jesus implies? Are study and prayer inherently more holy activities than making lemonade or setting the communion table? And if they are, is it the case that some people are called to one sort of work and other people to another?

It turns out that Paul’s body metaphors have the potential to lead us astray in our understandings of how this works. Because Paul’s metaphor of each body part having its own specific function might let us assume that Martha was just a worker bee; her job was to cook and clean-up. And Mary was a scholar bee, whose role was to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen. But the truth is that none of us is just one thing, and that resentment we see bubbling up from Martha’s soul is what happens when we get trapped – by our own neuroses or by others’ assumptions – doing just one thing.

I have always been struck by one detail in the reading we heard from Romans today. Paul describes a variety of roles within the church and the attributes needed to fulfill them. It’s mostly a rather redundant list. If your gift is ministering, you should minister well. If your gift is giving, be generous. These things mostly feel obvious. But then there’s the leader. And according to Paul, the grace that a leader needs is

diligence. It's always seemed a little surprising to me. I think most writers on leadership in our day and age would have gone with other characteristics – confidence, maybe, or charisma, big-picture thinking skills or the ability to communicate with different kinds of people. But Paul calls upon diligence. I wanted to check if that was an anomaly of translation so I looked at a wide number of other translations. While some of them used different words for the other gifts – service instead of ministry, or showing mercy in place of compassionate – almost all of them said this part the same way: leaders require diligence. One said that leaders must do their work “conscientiously” and another paraphrased it as “take the responsibility seriously.” But most of them just went with “the leader, in diligence.”

So what gives? Because I don't think anyone would try to argue that Martha wasn't being diligent. But we know what went wrong, don't we? Because we've been here before. It turns out there is such a thing as over-doing diligence. There is such a thing as taking on more than our fair share of the load. And that's not leadership; it is neither good for us, nor good for the body at large. Anyone who's ever had a bad hip can tell you what happens to the other one. You can't just say, “Oh well, I've got another one of those,” and expect your other hip to get you where you need to go without problems. It doesn't work that way. Hips are designed to work in pairs.

And again, this body metaphor can only carry us so far. Because if we spend all our time in the kitchen or the flower bed, and none of our time in study or prayer,

our vision can narrow and we can forget what church is for. If we spend all our time with the abstract, wordy parts of church life, we can lose our grasp on the incarnated realities of our faith. None of us is just a cook or a landscaper. None of us is just a giver of prayers or a preacher. But sometimes, we forget to stretch out past our comfort zones and instead burrow into that one job that we have claimed in the body and insist on taking care of it all on our own. It is a gift to the church when people take on responsibilities and carry them out diligently and conscientiously.

But holding a responsibility conscientiously does not mean keeping it to ourselves and barring others from getting involved in that aspect of the church's ministry. The truth is that it really is often easier to just do things ourselves. But in many situations, it is not better for the church for us to do things that way. The church is not healthier when certain people are indispensable because they're the only ones who know how to do such-and-such a task. Rather, such responsibility-hoarding makes the church vulnerable, because the day will always come when so-and-so who knew the trick to doing such-and-such is suddenly gone.

One of the things I often wonder about Martha is whether she was one of those people who was really hard to help. Had people volunteered to help out in her kitchen before, only to be told it was easier for her to do it herself, or to discover that everything they did was done the wrong way? Was no one stepping up the day Jesus came because of what had happened when they tried to help on previous occasions?

We know that is a real possibility, because we've lived it, haven't we? It's hard to let people into your kitchen or your workshop or your office, and have them do things differently than you would do them. We have ways that we do things, and there are good reasons for why we do them that way. And for some of us, those good reasons have hardened into something that feels like gospel, even though they are but one way of doing things.

The truth is that sharing the load is a sign of spiritual maturity just as diligence is, and the two must balance each other out. Diligence makes so much possible, but sharing the load is how growth happens. Bringing new people into the work is a gift. Learning the spiritual lesson, over and over, that there are many effective ways to accomplish various tasks, helps keep our souls supple. It might feel good to know that our church depends on us to function. But it's not necessarily good for the church. When new folks arrive, if there's no way for them to roll up their sleeves and get involved, they won't feel a strong urge to stick around. If we let ourselves get trapped into a role, it may eventually overwhelm us, while knowing no one else knows how to do it may make us feel desperate, until the only way out is to explode in a mess of resentment and bitterness. Bringing others into the work is part of the work itself, for that is the only way it is truly sustainable. That is how we avoid Martha moments. That is what truly conscientious leadership looks like. That is how we do the work in ways that help to build the body up in love. Hallelujah and Amen.