

THE SECOND WEEK IN LENT
everything [in] between faith & works

Read Luke 10:38-42

Commentary | Dr. Mindy McGarrah Sharp

“Are you a Mary or a Martha?” is the wrong question

Are you a Martha or a Mary? This familiar question reminds me of two former bosses. The first valued photographable work: build something tangible, make something quickly, sell something profitably. Don't just stand there, do something!

The second valued relational depth and learning across differences: linger with people, let it disrupt other tasks, for this is the work. Don't just do something, sit there!

The first go-getter had portfolios of success, but lacked depth and mutuality. The second sit-with-er had stories, but no material buildings to show for it. Which is better?

At first glance, this text forces an either/or, especially when we read Jesus' words with dripping condescension in translations that choose “the better part”⁵ to describe Mary's actions (Luke 10:42). Should we be a workhorse or build relationships? Surely, no one has time to always do both well.

Recall what happens in Luke just before. When asked about what a disciple has to do, Jesus' Good Samaritan story screams, “Don't just stand there (or pass by), do something!” Receiving Martha's frustrated question about unshared labor (where theological education was being counter-culturally offered to a woman), Jesus appears to scold, “Don't just do something, stand (or sit) there!”⁶

This could lead to a simple discernment—one choice better, one worse: choose better. But, when we read the Good Samaritan alongside this text, we see that Jesus blesses both: do something and sit there.

⁵ A more literal translation of the Greek might be: “Mary has chosen the good portion.”

⁶ “Don't just do something, stand there!” is also a foundational saying in family systems theory.

Further, Mary and Martha are sisters. They're related. My second boss was right about working hard for right relationship. My first boss was onto something too: what are you making together?

Rather than showing which is better, my back-to-back bosses raise deep questions about productivity and relationality. "Are you a Mary or a Martha?" is the wrong question.

What might it look like to shift our imagination from the ever-tempting mode of sibling rivalry—aiming to outdo each other, a tendency found in sacred texts and in contemporary families, cultures, and countries? What might a faith/works, works/faith healthy sibling relationship look like? What practices and habits would that require?

Decades after two very different bosses, I still have questions. What kind of relationships do the works we produce, photograph, and celebrate reflect? Is there shared labor and fair compensation? Does everyone get enough time and space to rest, reflect, and learn? Is theological education accessible to everyone across genders, sexualities, races, nationalities, abilities, ages, and every other difference? How would we know?

What new work could we create together with the benefit of sitting with each other, listening and learning each other's stories? Don't just work, reflect on what your faith requires: sit and listen. Don't just rest in faith, put it to work: respond through just relational networks. Repeat.

Reflect

In your own life, how are you valuing both productivity and relationships, active faith and faithful works?

