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Sermon Title: Sibling Rivalry: Get Over It!
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

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.'

"Sibling Rivalry." Brothers and sisters not always getting along or in agreement. Tonight is the 50th anniversary of the Beatles singing on the old "Ed Sullivan Show." That means it's the 50th anniversary of one of my sisters saying the Beatles are the best band in the world, the 50th anniversary of my telling her the Beatles stink, that the Rolling Stones are the best. And almost the 50th anniversary of another sister telling us both we were stupid, that the Monkees are the best ever. Sibling rivalry.

Our children's choir winter musical was based on today's Scripture about two sisters with very different priorities, very different perspectives, very different ways of being religious. Just plain very different. Over the last couple of months I've dropped in on several rehearsals, and it seemed to me as though they were especially enjoying this musical. And it's easy to see why. They understand it!

We all know sibling rivalry. Every family has it. You remember the old "Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour," where at some point in every routine, one brother would whine to the other brother, "Mom always liked you best!"

Whether it's perception or reality doesn't matter. In every family, someone's the favorite; someone's the "golden boy," the perfect child, the favorite. Plus each kid really is different. It is always amazing to me how two or three kids can be raised in the same family by the same parents in the same town, eating the same food, going to the same schools, and yet ... each one is entirely different from the other! One is quiet, reflective, insular. The other is outgoing, bombastic, social. One is artistic. The other is athletic. One loves math. The other hates math. And then they all grow up, and it's still the same!

Our Bible story for today is about two such sisters — nice people, good people, spiritual people. But very different. Martha and Mary. The Bible tells us that Jesus came to their town and "Martha opened her house to him." Now, don't forget. Jesus had 12 official disciples, and he also had a bunch of other followers, but we know for sure he had 12 hungry, big-appetite guys with him. So when the Bible says, "Martha opened her home to Jesus," she really took on hospitality for at least 13 people. We also know that wherever Jesus went, he drew a crowd, the Bible tell us us. Jesus sat in Martha's house, teaching. So we can assume the house was jammed with a bunch of other people. I'm going to guess 50, all told.

In November in India, I preached in a new church. It was a tiny little house to begin with. I had visited there many times, and when the family decided to start a church, they just tore down one wall between rooms to give themselves a tiny little sanctuary. It was jam-packed with people, not a spare inch anywhere, and when I counted the house (pastors always count the house), there were 50 people there. I figure Martha's house was probably the same size, with people sitting on the floor, kids on laps, filling every square inch. Let's say 50 people.

Now, remember, this takes place in ancient Israel, the old Middle East, where hospitality is practically a sacrament. Even today, much of the world is that way; hospitality is a sacrament, an obligation, an art form, even an honor. They would be offended not to cook for you, not to serve you, not to overwhelm you with food.

Go to an Armenian family for dinner. Try to get out of there without gaining 10 pounds. Or go to India with Alida. Our Indian hosts will sit you down and give you food. After you've finished, they bring out more food. Then comes the main course. And after the main course, there's more food. And that's just breakfast!

In other words, hospitality for the hosts is a lot of work. It might be an honor, a sacrament, a tradition; it might even be fun. But it's still work. And Martha couldn't call PeaPod or The Pantry and have it delivered.

Martha had to run to the market, get the food, slice and dice, cook and serve, pour, refill, clean up. Have you noticed I keep mentioning Martha? But the story is about *Mary* and Martha. Where's Mary? Good question. That's what Martha wants to know! But she knows darn well where Mary is. She couldn't miss her. She's sitting right there, down front, "sitting at Jesus's feet, listening."

That's exactly what the Bible says: "Mary sat at Jesus's feet, listening." In other words, every time Martha walked into the room carrying a heavy tray of pomegranates and then comes back with hummus and fish, and then runs back in with the wine, then passes around the bread, every time she scampered back and forth, she saw her sister "sitting at Jesus's feet," soaking up the atmosphere, looking so holy, listening intently, being inspired, AND, for all intents and purposes, doing nothing. Zip. Nada. Just sitting there.

Martha is sweaty, grimy, exhausted, and increasingly grumpy. The Bible tries to put it nicely. It says, "But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made, so she went to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.'"

My, goodness, is that universal, or what? Any family that has ever asked the kids to do anything has ended up with one kid complaining about the other kid. Even if they're adults! "Tell Billy he has to help, too!" "I have to clean my room. Make Susie clean her room." "I don't want to take the garbage out. I took the garbage out once last year." "Joe's so lazy, you never make him do anything." And on and on and on and on. Every home, every family.

To tell you the truth, Jesus does not help things one bit. He responds in the worst possible way. "Martha, Martha," he says. It's never good when you say someone's name twice like that. It's condescending. It's patronizing. It says you're not being taken seriously, and it's always followed by some rebuke. "Martha, Martha" is sort of the personal form of "Now Now," and that's always infuriating. "Calm down, now. It's no big deal. You're blowing things out of proportion. Get hold of yourself. Stop it. Grow up." That's all implied with the double name thing, and it only gets worse from there. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. But only one thing is needed. And Mary has chosen what is better."

Oh, no, did Jesus really say that? Seriously? You could hear a pin drop in that little house, all eyes turned toward Martha, conversation stopped, eating stopped, as the words fell on Martha like a sledgehammer. "Mary has chosen what is better." You're flitting all about doing all this silly, unimportant stuff, working yourself into a tizzy. Meanwhile, your sister, your nice, spiritual, thoughtful, pleasant, sweet sister has chosen what is better.

In my mind's eye, I see Martha reaching for a frying pan, a big, heavy cast iron frying pan, before Peter whisks her aside and puts a glass of wine in her hand. Any lessons from this story? Well, may I be so bold as to offer a lesson or two to Jesus?

First, never start a sentence with "Martha, Martha." That doesn't work. Second, never look a gift horse in the mouth. Jesus traveled with an entourage, 13 men all told, with no income, no visible means of support, relying on the kindness of others, so telling the lady who had done all the cooking and feeding that her do-nothing sister was better ... not cool.

And yet, there must be good reasons why this story made it into the Bible. Maybe there is a lesson or two for us. First, doing good is no excuse for being grumpy. And you don't do it for credit. We've all seen this in our lives, people get roped into doing something they really don't want to do, and they get browbeaten. Or people hang on doing something long after they've ceased enjoying it. Or they're doing it for the wrong motive in the first place: obligation, responsibility, guilt. And it shows.

I'll bet "Martha, Martha" didn't just blow up. I'll bet she had been seething for a while. I'll bet as she watched Mary out of the corner of her eye, she slammed a plate down in front of St. Peter and slammed a cup down in front of St. John and spilled wine all over St. Thomas. I'll bet her grumpiness clouded out her hospitality. She lost sight of her purpose.

I love the way the Bible puts it. It says, "Martha was distracted by all the work." *Distracted*. So she went to Jesus to complain. When you're distracted, you lose your focus, you take your eye off the ball, you forget what's important. The distraction becomes your priority. Resentment. Anger. Jealousy. Frustration.

Martha started out proud to be hosting the Messiah. She ended up mad at her sister. It could happen here. Imagine if I announced, "Jesus Christ is coming here to Greenfield Hill Church this morning. I hope you'll be able to stay." Right away, you'd be thinking, *I can't, my son has a hockey game at 11. My in-laws are coming for lunch. I have a hot yoga class at 3. The Olympics are on. I don't have time for this!* Distractions make us grumpy.

Second, the fact is we all have different gifts, different interests, different ways of going about things. And there is a time and a place for everything. Or, as the Bible says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

Martha clearly was a worker bee. Thirteen men showed up at her house. Neighbors started pouring in, and Martha got to work. And let's face it; worker bees make the world go round. They get things done. Especially the un-fun things. The drudgery, the detail. That's a gift. A true gift.

May I say this? I think Jesus actually got it wrong when he said, "Mary has chosen what is better." Or, if you don't like to think Jesus was wrong, let's just say he was, um, imprecise, inarticulate. He could have said it better. Maybe he could have said, "Martha, (just one Martha), I just want to thank you for all you've done to make this day so special. We couldn't have done this without you. You truly have a great gift, the way you make everyone feel welcome. I can't possibly thank you enough. Now, how about we all take a break. Men, pick up your dishes, let's take everything into the kitchen. Peter, John, you wash. I'll dry. Martha, why don't you stay by my side, we can chat a bit. Then, let's reconvene in an hour. I have one more story to tell you. I call it 'The Parable of the Great Banquet.'" In other words, a little appreciation goes a long way.

When I was at Habitat, we had a saying, "Everybody wants to get paid well." Now, remember, Habitat was mostly a volunteer organization. It grew on the backs of thousands of volunteers. Even at our headquarters. I'll bet one-third of our staff were \$25 per week volunteers. And yet, I said, "All of them want to be well paid." But not necessarily in money. Respect. Recognition. Gratitude. Fellowship. A sense of worth. Importance. Doing God's work. Just never tell the person who's sweating that the person doing nothing is better.

Third, it's O.K. to "sit at Jesus's feet, listening." Going back to Ecclesiastes, or Pete Seeger, who wrote the song, or The Byrds, who made it famous, "Turn, turn, turn, for everything there is a season ... even a time to refrain from speaking" or doing. Sometimes we really do need to sit at Jesus's feet listening, soaking it up, being inspired, That, too, can be O.K., There is a time to be quiet, be still, be reflective, be receiving, be thinking. And that's O.K. Just not all the time.

With the start of the Olympics in Russia, I remembered a story from years ago. When I was a pastor in New York City, we were asked to host Rev. Alexander Bychkov, the head of almost all Protestants in the old Soviet Union. My kids were nervous because whenever someone angered me, I'd call him a "communist." Like, if some driver cut me off on the Van Wyck

Expressway, I'd yell out, "Communist." Well, anyway, I had Rev. Bychkov preach that Sunday, and he preached on today's Bible story. Remember, this was back in the old communist, atheist, anti-religion Soviet Union, and he told the story this way:

He said American Christianity was like Martha. We had the freedom to do anything, everything. We can feed the hungry, build houses in Appalachia, run youth groups, and do evangelism. We can work hard, sweat hard. Like Martha. But Christianity under communism is like Mary. All they could do, he said, was "sit at Jesus's feet, listening." That's all they were allowed to do in those bad old days. They could go to church on Sunday. They could listen to the sermon, read the Bible. That was it. They weren't allowed to sweat. They weren't allowed to scurry about, serving Jesus.

Now it's 2014. The old Soviet Union is gone. The Berlin Wall has fallen down. The Iron Curtain has been torn away. And all over that part of the world, the Christian Church is growing, working, doing, sweating.

Through our own church's mission, we support two projects that keep us involved in old Europe as the Mary church and the Martha church are learning to work together in just the right balance.

Let's close with this poem that I wrote in my first *Fieldstones* book, based on today's story.

**The Inner Kitchen: Mary and Martha
(Luke 10:38-42)**

*Two
sisters
worshippers, workers
well respected, then,
venerated
now
one pensive, pious, listening
one active, zealous, glistening
each giving their all, their best
to Christ,
friend, savior, guest
their house turned upside down
their routine pushed around
favored with His presence.
His essence
drawing from each what they would learn
what they would teach*

*the subtle art of sitting
quiet
or loudly working
a kitchen riot
for merit
missing the point
to do and be.
Both, worthy, without complaint,
enough for a saint.*