

My first pastorate was in a small farm community where the deacons – all men – made the decisions and the women did most of the work. An older



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pastor who mentored me advised that I avoid a timetable for the second coming, stay away from discussions about women deacons, and go along with their policy of scheduling the Lord's Supper on Sunday nights when there would be a slim possibility of any visitors in worship!

There can be a lot of pitfalls in organized religion. Today's study confronts one of those pitfalls: what about women in the family of God and in the life of the church? The battle lines were drawn long ago. Jesus set out a new perspective when he arrived at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. We confront a significant question: "Do we interpret Scripture according to the traditions and practices of our culture or do we shape our culture, inside and outside the church, by the Bible?"

In biblical times, women rarely had a status comparable to men. In the synagogues women were partitioned behind a screen away from the men. Rabbis did not speak to women in public, nor did they have women students. Women served men before the women could eat a meal. When traveling, women walked while the men rode. Even in the Temple the courtyard of women was farther from the sacred holy of holies than the courtyard of men. So our text for today is not just a story of conflict between two sisters, but a radical instance of Jesus breaking all the established gender rules and welcoming women as valued equals in the family of God.

The home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany became a restful place for Jesus when he was visiting nearby Jerusalem. We know Bethany

best because of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-46). But what seems like a quiet little story about domestic conflict between two sisters erases gender barriers for God's people and reminds us that focusing on spiritual truth is far above "distracting tasks" (v. 40).

While Mary sits at Jesus' feet, eager to learn about God's love and how to be a follower of Jesus, an exhausted Martha loses all patience and finally confronts Jesus: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me" (v. 40). Jesus calmly and plainly confronts Martha's frustration and confused values: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is only need of one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (vv. 41-42).

Look away from the sisters' tension for a moment and consider how adept we are at planning and doing programs, scheduling events, management strategies, organizational structures, etc. Success, big, numbers, lights and action, internet impact ... but there is a loss of solid biblical knowledge, a failure to daily live out the grace of God, a lack of individual spiritual depth in the modern church. We may smile at Martha's agitation over Mary's absence from the kitchen, but we, like Martha, often lose sight of spiritual values with our determination to accomplish.

"There is need of only one thing," Jesus says, and that one thing is to learn from Jesus and live accordingly. Both Mary and Martha are remarkable in their devotion to Jesus: Martha can remind us to act responsibly and Mary can remind us to shape our life on the teachings of Jesus. There is no gender bias in the words or actions of Jesus. It was women who watched Jesus die on the cross. It was women who first met the risen Christ at the garden tomb. We make a serious mistake when we

see only the male leaders in the New Testament church. The women are always there, but the men are more numerous in the literature because of the cultural norms of that day.

Perhaps, even in our "enlightened" times, the church fails to understand the difference between religion and the gospel. Is it more important to be a church member, tithe, hold a leadership position, than to focus on personal Bible study and prayer, serve those in need, and be a Christian example in the outside world? Religion requires us to do more, earn our place, and check the boxes to make sure everyone including God notices. But God's grace is not given in proportion to a time card or list of accomplishments. The gospel is experienced through God's gift of Jesus.

When you sit at the feet of Jesus you discover that God loves you and that he wants to bless you. The gift of eternal life cannot be earned even if you work as hard as Martha. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). That simple statement about God's love as the open door to eternal life reminds us that anything and everything we attempt can never measure up to the gift of Christ. We can work ourselves into exhaustion like Martha did, when the answer to the deepest longing of her heart was in her own home sharing God's love with anyone who would sit down and listen.

Martha challenges our thinking. Mary makes us smile. But our word of hope is seen in the way Jesus talks to those two sisters, the way he accepts them as they are and offers them both God's love. In the incessant demands of a dissonant world and the business of our churches can we hear our Savior invite us to choose "the better part, which will not be taken from (us)"? (v. 42).