



Shaped to Serve

Sunday, March 19, 2017

Mary & Martha: The Bickering Sisters

Some Background

A common interpretation of Mary and Martha's story focuses on a simple question: are you a Mary or a Martha? Based on Luke 10:38-42, Martha is depicted as an organized, get-things-done kind of woman—though a bit too busy and distracted. In contrast, Mary exemplifies the lost-in-the-moment dreamer praised by Jesus for choosing the better part.

However, there is more complexity to these ancestors in the faith. Mary's attentiveness to Jesus extended beyond hospitality of the day. Sitting at Jesus' feet in Luke 10:39 was the posture of a disciple who was eager to learn from her rabbi. Anointing Jesus' feet in John 12:3 was an act of deep devotion. Jesus freely gave to Mary in the form of his teaching and freely received Mary's gifts. Intensely aware of his pending death, Mary's presence was both comforting and appreciated.

But don't count Martha out! When she heard Jesus was coming after the death of Lazarus, Martha was the one to go out and meet him while Mary stayed at home. In the conversation between Martha and Jesus in John 11:21-27, Martha professes belief in Jesus' power and his identity as the Son of God. And she goes ahead to tell Mary privately that Jesus would arrive and that he was calling for her.

Mary may be the seated sister who learns at Jesus feet, but Martha is on the move, communicating the message about Jesus' presence. Through the Luke text and these stories in John 11-12, we see a family deeply loved by Jesus. While we can imagine tensions between Mary and Martha, we know they also experienced significant highs and lows together—the presence of a renowned rabbi teaching in their home, the sadness as they grieve the death of their dearly-loved brother, and the joy of his resurrection from the dead.

To encounter these sisters is to discover that in the midst of their conflicts, they were deeply committed followers of Jesus. Their stories and interactions—with one another and with Jesus—revealed who Jesus was and offered a glimpse of God’s kingdom that speaks both in their time and to us today.

Teacher Homework: Read some key passages about the Mary and Martha: Luke 10:38-42 / John 11 / John 12:1-8.

Youth Mindset: Youth can easily relate to Mary and Martha, not only because of sibling rivalry (or a similar relationship with friends), but because youth are great at simultaneously reinforcing and challenging social norms. Mary’s boldness in sitting at Jesus’ feet (three times!) defied the status quo and signaled her faith in him.

Opening Activity

Have you ever felt “embarathy” for someone? This made-up term, a combination of embarrassment and empathy, describes the awkward moment when you feel embarrassed on behalf of another person. Martha may have felt “embarathy” for Jesus when Mary broke social conventions and sat at the teacher’s feet, learning alongside men. Think about a time when you felt “embarathy” for someone and share this with the students. Then invite students to share similar stories.

Watch the Video

Show the video: “Mary & Martha: The Bickering Sisters.”

- What surprised you from the video? What is one word to describe Mary? Martha?
- Which character do you resonate with most? Why?
- Do you see any connections between their story and your own family relationships?

In the Bible

Bethany, the name of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus’s town, meant “house of misery.” It was probably a residence for people who were sick, poor, and outcasts. Because of its location on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Bethany was a place many people traveled through on the way to and from the temple. Encourage youth to imagine what this “house of misery” might have looked, smelled, felt, and tasted like. Once you have set the scene, skim through John 11-13 as a group to see what Jesus was doing before and after he responded to the sisters and raised Lazarus from the dead.

- What neighborhood or city from today might compare to Bethany? Describe what that place is like. Who lives there?

- How did Mary, Martha, and Lazarus's family seem pretty normal? Different? How was their family important to Jesus' ministry?
- Do you know any ordinary people who have been part of extraordinary events? What happened?
- As a group, imagine how Mary, Martha, and Lazarus's lives changed after Lazarus was raised from the dead. What changed? What stayed the same?

Closing Ritual

Share in "highs and lows" together. Mary and Martha had many high and low moments as well, but they knew who Jesus was, even more so than the twelve disciples. What does it mean to know who Jesus is no matter the highs and lows of life?

Take-Home Question

Jesus says of Mary that she picked the "better part" sitting at his feet. Over the course of the next week, where might you choose the "better part" by befriending someone lonely, studying the Bible instead of playing video games, helping out at home rather than sitting alone in your room or staring at your phone, etc. Share about this "better part" in your response. How did it feel to spend some time picking the "better part."