

**Sermon / 17 July 2022 / Luke 10:28-42 / Both/And
St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM
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With God, it is not either/or.

With God, it is both/and.

I've got more to say, but I want you to remember that.

With God, it is not either/or.

With God, it is both/and.

Today's Gospel lesson is about an unexpected guest, hospitality, and listening. You may have heard the story before. It's the story of sisters Mary and Martha. BOTH Mary AND Martha.

Jesus drops by Mary and Martha's house. Martha is busy doing things one does when a guest arrives. Mary, instead of helping her sister, pulls up a seat by Jesus to listen to what he has to say. Martha is upset she's left to do all the work and complains to Jesus. Martha wants Jesus to tell Mary to help her.

In my humble opinion, Jesus' response is a little murky. Jesus tells Martha she is worrying about things which aren't all that important. Let Mary do what Mary wants to do.

I've often heard this explained as a rebuke of Martha's choice to be hospitable – whatever tasks she felt she had to do. Instead, I'd like us to look at it like this: Jesus is telling Martha that she has made her choice and Mary has made her choice. Right now, each of them has chosen the thing that is best for them.

So, Martha, keep doing what you've chosen to do or change your focus. But don't complain about it.

Jesus is saying it's not either/or.

Jesus says it's both/and.

This story isn't about a competition. It isn't about who is better – either Mary or Martha.

This is a story about living life. It's a story about choices – both Mary's choice AND Martha's.

It isn't about being either a good host OR a good listener.

This story is about making choices that will allow you to be both a good host AND a good listener.

This story embodies a common phrase we hear a lot these days. Work/Life Balance. How do I juggle being both Martha (that's the work) AND Mary (that's the life)?

Mother Sylvia and I have the distinct honor to be working with a group of people in the Diocese of the Rio Grande who are discerning their call to serve God. We met with the group this past week and listened to a video presentation by Rev. Jeannine Driscoll on this very topic.

How do I get that Work/Life Balance just right? How do I say "Both/And" to God?

Jeanine told us it's a myth. This Work/Life balance is not a balance, but rather a shifting of attention. And to accomplish that, one must pay attention to paying attention.

As beloved Children of God what does any given situation call for us to do? We can achieve that "Both/And" situation by considering how we can best respond at any given moment with the gifts and talents God has given us.

That's why it's "Both/And" and not just "Both." We can't do more than one thing at a time. The entire concept of multi-tasking is a bigger myth than achieving a work/life balance. Jeanine suggests being both Mary AND Martha is about figuring out when and how to shift our attention to the next most important thing.

As a child, I once participated in an activity to illustrate this concept – specifically related to this story of Mary and Martha. All the children in the Sunday School class participated in a relay race while our teacher read a Bible story. At the end of the race, we were asked questions about the story. Of course, we knew nothing about that story because we'd been so intent on the game we'd been playing. We then all sat quietly in a circle while the story was read again. This time, we knew how to respond to the questions because we had not been distracted by our many tasks. Obviously, running the relay race was Martha. Listening to the Bible story was Mary.

It wasn't that the relay race was bad and the Bible story was good. It simply proved that you can't do two things – you can't do two things well - at the same time.

Achieving "Both/And" is assisted with planning and structure. But making "Both/And" work requires paying attention to paying attention. That means you are able to change your focus when it's called for. And to ignore other ideas vying for your focus when you are working on something.

You can't be a good host and a good listener at the same time. But you can be both a good host and a good listener during the time span of Jesus' visit. Perhaps this story of Mary and Martha could have been played out by Martha simplifying what she thought needed to be accomplished for Jesus' visit. Maybe she could have asked Mary for about 30 minutes of her time and then suggest they both could sit and listen to Jesus for the rest of the day. If Mary chose not to help her, Martha might then adjust her expectations and decide what would work best for her.

Because it doesn't have to be either/or.

With God, Martha and Mary could choose both/and.

We can choose both/and.

Now let's take it a step further. How many people here today enjoy improvisational acting? Improv, as it's commonly known, involves a group of people on stage with no script – not even an idea of what they are going to say or do. They are then given a starting point and must then run with it and create something from nothing.

The results are most often, hopefully, hilarious. As the participants play off one another and keep the story going.

And the #1 rule for improv is this: "Yes, and."

You can go to the website of any improvisational acting company and find this to be true. The number #1 rule is “Yes, and.”

Whatever another participant says, you must agree to it. That’s the yes.

And then you must add something more to the story. That’s the and.

Without saying yes and adding more to the story, the improvisational play comes to a screeching halt.

Let’s make that happen with today’s Gospel lesson: Starting point – Jesus drops by the house of two sisters for a visit.

Yes! And one sister’s name is Martha. She is a Type A personality who thinks everything must be perfect. She starts whipping up a dinner in her gourmet kitchen and turns on the Roomba.

Yes! And the other sister, Mary, is thoughtful, maybe a little nerdy, and wants to listen to what Jesus has to say. She pulls up a beanbag chair and hangs on Jesus’ every word.

Yes! And Martha resents doing all the work herself. She passive aggressively slams pots and pans in her gourmet kitchen.

Yes! And Martha secretly wishes SHE could spend time listening to Jesus, too. She leans over the kitchen island of her open-concept house to hear what’s being talked about

Yes! And Jesus invites Martha to join them.

Yes! And Martha throws all the ingredients for dinner in her Insta-Pot and now has plenty of time to join her sister in thoughtful conversation with Jesus.

Yes! And Mary decides she will load the dishwasher after dinner to help her sister.

Yes! And Jesus says “I love you, my dear friends. Both Mary and Martha.”

That was fun, sure. But as Rev. Jeanine told us in the discernment group this week, in this improv, Martha was able to shift her focus when the need called for her to do so. She didn’t achieve a perfect work/life balance. But she was able to achieve a “both/and” situation.

With God, it never has to be either/or.

God calls us to say “yes” and then encourages us to a life of both/and.

Like an improv acting troupe who has no idea where they are headed, we must always say yes to God’s call.

Like that acting troupe, we are called to add more to the story. The “yes” is not enough to keep God’s love spreading throughout the world. We are called to add the “and.”

Like our discernment group learned this week, we are called to focus our attention on the tasks at hand, shift our focus when required, and use our gifts and talents as best we can to live into our lives as beloved children of God.

Like Mary and Martha, we are called to be both good hosts and good listeners. And the list of both/and situations and calls is endless.

With God, it is not either/or.

With God, it is both/and.

Yes! Both! And!