

Mary *and* Martha
Luke 10:38-42
Rev. Phiwa Langeni
Zion UCC – Florissant, MO
July 17, 2016

Dualisms are some of the biggest things wrong with our world today, yet they seem to underlie most of the systems by which we live and learn. Dualisms are essentially the practices and beliefs of either/or, this or that, one thing or another. I have to admit, there's a certain appeal to using them. I mean, they're pretty simple to grasp conceptually.

If you were a child growing up in the United States, you're well acquainted with dualisms. Sesame Street was loaded with them: Hot or cold. Up or down. Blue or red. Big or small. They're an effective teaching tool. You only have two options with a 50% chance of being right. The process of elimination is nice too; if you're sure it's not one, you already know the right answer.

The nice features of dualisms, though, are also their worst, especially when applied to life, which just does *not* occur in cute little either/or packages. If we spend our lives putting things into categories of black or white, we fully neglect all the beautiful varieties of grey in the spaces between. Things are rarely, if ever, so clear cut.

More troubling is the way dualisms pit the poles against each other. The items on each end tend to be viewed as opposites, even when they're not. In doing so, there's an implied comparison, as in one is better or more desirable than the other. Living with systems based on dualisms quickly becomes harsh and unfair to those who belong to the so-called less desirable pole.

So if dualisms are so limiting, why do we continue to participate in them? Perhaps it really is just a fear of the unknown and the undefined. We seem to not know what to do when we encounter someone who just doesn't fit into some pre-determined categories. Sometimes that someone is the self you thought you knew. We get so uncomfortable as we hang in the

balance between one space and the next, struggling to fit into one category or another.

I believe a re-examination of our ideas of the spaces in between is necessary for all of us. It doesn't have to be a scary and uncomfortable place at all. I think those spaces are full of countless possibilities. If we get the opportunity to define self instead of self being defined by one pole or the other, I believe that just about anything is possible. There's so much beauty in those spaces. God is in those spaces. That idea alone gives me so much comfort, especially as one who lives most of my life in between many poles of this or that.

That's my lens as I approach our brief gospel reading this morning. We learn of Jesus going into another village during his travels. He's invited and welcomed into a home by a woman named Martha. We've explored different texts together enough for me to quickly highlight the reminder that hospitality was quite an ordeal back in that day. For Martha to welcome Jesus into their home, we can assume she went all out to bring this special traveler into their home.

We learn from the text that Martha had a sister named Mary. Unlike Martha, Mary "...sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." This is also a noteworthy detail for us to consider in the hearing of the story. Back then, there were some very specific ways women were expected to engage in public and especially with men present. Even though we know women were essential for the development and growth of the church throughout history, how they went about it still had some cultural nuances that Mary seems to be transgressing by sitting at Jesus' feet, listening and learning with the others.

So Martha, who's diligently going about the work of serving and being hospitable, realizes she's the only doing the work. Her sister has left her to do it on her own, so much so that her many tasks have distracted her from getting to enjoy the benefits of having such a special guest in their home. Perhaps in frustration, she takes a moment from her duties to ask Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

For those of us who have siblings, this little speech may feel very familiar. When your siblings are goofing off and you're the only one doing the work, you go to the adults with your concerns in hopes they'll help right what you feel is wrong. I imagine Jesus' response to Martha wasn't one she'd expected. He says to 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." Now, as the sibling who was almost always in the right (but feel free to never check in with my siblings), I'm feeling some kinda way on Martha's behalf.

What in the world does Jesus mean by taking Mary's side; the Mary who isn't pulling her weight around here with all these tasks that need to get done? What does he mean by her choosing the better part? Ugh, and he's totally letting her get away with it since he's not going to tell her to get up here and help out. If this were one of my siblings, they'd have made a face to go along with Jesus taking their side. Siblings or no, I think most, if not all of us, have experienced this kind of tension at some point in our lives.

But here's the thing. Up until this week, this is how I've been taught to read and engage this scripture. There's a dualism there between Martha who is doing, doing, doing and Mary who's just being. There's a tension between Martha, who feels what she's doing is right and should be joined by Mary, and Mary, who feels what *she's* doing is right, even as she defies the societal rules set in place for her.

Reading this text in such a dualistic way is problematic. It's easy to do, considering the way in which Jesus responded to Martha. A more helpful read is to consider how Jesus, by supposedly siding with Mary, may actually be presenting a new way for *everyone* to participate in a life of an inclusive God who loves and cares for us all. Jesus is presenting an both/and type of God, rather than one concerned with either/or.

This scripture of the two sisters isn't about one sister being better than another. If we're honest about ourselves, we'll find we have both Martha and Mary within us at any given time. Some of us operate more naturally as a Martha, others more so as a

Mary, but all of us having a bit of both. What I'm hoping to offer as a potential way of grasping this scripture is that Jesus is lifting up the challenge of when to be rather than who to be. We are both, and there's a time for each. The wisdom comes in knowing when to be, *even if it violates society's norms*.

That's the gift Jesus gives as he lovingly calls Martha's name, inviting her to see herself beyond her prescribed roles. He beckons for her to not miss the opportunity laid before her as she's distracted by the many tasks around her, many of them determined by others. And so this is the same invitation I offer all of us here today, that we might look beyond the temptation to lean into the dualisms in the story and find that same call for *us* to not get distracted by the very many tasks around us, the very many roles prescribed to us based on categories and the different identities we embody.

God made many categories, all of them beautiful. But we humanfolk have taken some categories and elevated them over others, deciding which are more desirable or better than others. I think the rainbow is a perfect illustration of God's fluidity in creation. The way I remember it, the colors flow one into the next. I wouldn't be as excited to see a two-striped rainbow of just black and white, but that's exactly what we create when we relentlessly participate in dualisms, intentionally or unintentionally. There's so much beauty in the fluidity that's in nature. I wonder why it's so hard for us to consider that that might be how humans are too.

Dualisms, while convenient to some, are not life-giving to most. We need to start being fair to ourselves and each other and start embracing those spaces in between. There's so much beauty there that we may never realize if we keep ourselves bound to pre-packaged ideas of being. We need to stop undercutting all the beauty that is God's creation. We need to have more compassion for each other as we learn to embrace the Marys and the Marthas and all that's in-between. Instead, with Jesus, I encourage us to continue learning how to live and love with our full selves. I pray that we can tend to the Martha within us who feels the call to serve without abandon. I pray that we can nurture the Mary within us who boldly recognizes the need to be present in the

moment, disregarding the distractions all around. I pray that we can more courageously challenge our EITHER/OR tendencies and more powerfully embrace the BOTH/AND in our lives.

Amen.