

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, July 17, 2016

**Women's Lib in Judea**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
July 17, 2016

Luke 10:38-42

I am sure you are familiar with today's very short scripture reading from Luke, but what does it really mean?

Is the younger sister Mary just goofing off and letting her older sister Martha do all of the work? After all the house is full of guests with Jesus and his disciples and there is a lot of work to be done to prepare a meal for them, yet Mary is ignoring that and is just sitting there listening to what Jesus has to say. Is that fair? Shouldn't she be helping Martha?

Another take on the scripture, one you likely have heard before, is that it was far more important for Mary to be listening to the words of Jesus than to be concerned about helping to prepare the meal. I think that most of us would side with Mary on this issue. After all even Jesus said that Mary had made the correct choice. So that's it --- right? No, wrong!

The scripture reading is far more meaningful than Mary simply making the choice of listening to Jesus instead of helping Martha --- far, far more meaningful.

In a way it was women's' lib in Judea, of all places, 2000 years ago.

Let us look at the scene and the culture of the times more closely. If there ever was a time and place in history where the phrase "a woman's place is in the home" was more culturally descriptive, it was probably in the highly patriarchal society of Biblical times.

Last week I talked about the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the lawyer asking what he could do to inherit eternal life. The lawyer, a scribe, was a man skilled in the scriptures and he did not understand. Jesus gave him an example of what he must do, the example of the Good Samaritan showing what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

According to Fred Craddock <sup>(1)</sup>, in today's story Jesus is visiting a woman, Martha, who is "*... so busy serving that she does not hear the word, and Jesus offers her an example, her sister. To the man, Jesus said to go and do; to the woman, Jesus*

*said to sit down, listen, and learn.”*

But there is more to the story than that. Martha is trying her best to be a good hostess. That is what the culture of the times expected. A woman should serve the guests and not be concerned with other things. But our women's libber, Mary, doesn't think that way. She sits at Jesus' feet to listen to him. She forgets about hospitality and opts to learn what she can. This was the better choice in Jesus' eyes, but it meant far more than that, far more than Mary shirking her duties and not doing any work.

There is a great symbolic lesson here.

First, in that culture it simply was not considered to be proper for men to visit the home of single women where a man was not present. It just wasn't done and scripture gives us no indication that there was anyone else at the home other than Mary and Martha. So Jesus was breaking tradition to even go there and Martha was breaking tradition by asking him in.

The tradition of the times was also that a rabbi, such as Jesus, would never waste any time sharing his wisdom with, **gasp, a female**. It just wasn't done but here was Jesus doing it.

Then there is the fact that our women's libber, Mary, sat at Jesus' feet. **Wow! What a scandal!** Only those who sat at the feet of a teacher were his disciples. Did this mean that Mary was a disciple? Did Jesus really have women disciples? Emphatically yes! Christ had far more than twelve disciples and many of his disciples were women. Rabbis never had women as disciples, but this one did. Christ, in a way, was the first leader of the women's liberation movement some 2000 years ago.

The shocking nature of Mary's action is emphasized by the fact that back then girls never received any kind of formal education. They were taught only household duties --- sewing, weaving, cooking, and the like.

The Mishnah, the first major work of rabbinic literature said, "... if a man gave his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery." Women simply were excluded from any form of education, even via worship in the synagogue. Back then the synagogue was a male bastion. It was a men's club. NO women were allowed. Even today, men and women generally sit separately at Jewish and Muslim services.

So, while Martha was playing her traditional role, Mary was breaking new ground and Jesus was breaking cultural traditions and expectations "... *by affirming the status*

*of a woman as his disciple.”<sup>(2)</sup>*

*“Luke is not making a choice between [Mary and Martha], nor is he asking the reader to accept one and reject the other. Both the Samaritan and Mary are examples, and both are to be emulated. The burden lies in discerning when to do the one and when to do the other.”<sup>(3)</sup>*

Our passage of scripture this morning is often cited in devotional booklets. One issue of Our Daily Bread (October 13, 2001) asked if you are too busy to know God. It said, *“Having invited Jesus to be a guest in her home, [Martha] set about doing what she thought were important things. Because Mary wasn’t helping, Martha felt justified in asking Jesus to chide her. It’s a mistake many of us make: We’re so busy doing good that we don’t spend time getting to know God better.”*

Martha was distracted from what was the most important.

Another issue of Our Daily Bread (January 28, 2015) said, *“Sometimes distractions can be a problem in our relationship with God. In fact, that was the concern Jesus had for His friend Martha. She was distracted by the preparations that had to be made ‘for a meal.’*

*“... Martha’s distractions were well-intentioned. But she was missing the opportunity to listen to Jesus and enjoy His presence. He is deserving of our deepest devotion, and he alone can fully enable us to overcome any of life’s distractions.”*

**Amen.**

1. Fred B. Craddock, Interpretation: Luke, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990.
2. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Volume 1, Clinton E. Arnold, ed., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002.
3. Fred B. Craddock, et al, Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1994.