

After the telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus and his disciples move on to another village where there is a woman named Martha who welcomes him. We really know little about Martha, nothing before this story, to which we add what we later learn about her in the Gospel of John.

But surely there must have been some history of her relationship with Jesus before this story, for they seem to converse freely in the story and Martha seems to know that Jesus is coming to her village for she has invited him to her house.

Her invitation of Jesus to her house is unusual because John will tell us that she has a brother, Lazarus, who being a man should have made any invitation to their home.

Still we do know that she has invited him and she, herself, not her brother, welcomes Jesus when he gets there.

Martha has a sister named Mary. The sisters' personalities seem very different and their differences cause friction between the sisters. I don't like Mary very much. She seems very passive even lazy to me. She makes no effort to welcome Jesus. You almost get the feeling that she was already sitting on the couch when he got there and rather than move she just stays and listens.

This passiveness is true to Mary in the story of the sisters in John when Jesus comes to visit and Martha goes out to welcome him as he enters town and Mary decides to just hang out at the house with friends.

Just as in Jesus' day it was unusual for a woman to invite a man to visit or welcome him, it was also unusual that Jesus allows Mary to "sit at his feet" which was a phrase implying that he lets Mary be instructed as a disciple. Women were not allowed to be disciples of rabbis. It was not a woman's place.

While Mary is listening to Jesus, Martha is trying to get the meal ready and she gets more and more agitated by her sister not lifting a finger while she herself is working like a dog to get things ready as a woman should do. Mary should be helping. Resentment builds as Martha works while Mary listens. Martha had invited Jesus, she wanted to listen too, but the meal is important.

Frustration builds until Martha actually goes into the room where Jesus teaches and interrupts the teaching to ask Jesus whether he even cares that her sister is leaving her to do all the work? "Tell her to get up and get into the kitchen."

At first Jesus' answer seems a little condescending, "Oh Martha, Martha..."

At our house the living room and kitchen are really one big room. One evening Betsy had come in from work begun supper I was watching television on the couch as she worked and gradually I noticed that the pots and pans were especially loud. I could feel Betsy's irritation with me growing until she said, "Todd, I could use your help."

I said, "Betsy, Betsy, you are distracted by many things.." I really don't remember anything after that."

Really, I don't think Jesus was condescending. I wonder if he is just trying to get her attention over all the clamor of pots and pans and resentment. "Martha, Martha, listen to me. You are distracted by many things there is need of only one thing and Mary has chosen the better part."

Jesus' words are confusing. It is difficult to know what he is really saying. Is he saying that Martha should not be working in the kitchen but sitting and listening? Is Jesus saying that Martha had found the courage to disregard conventional roles of women, had invited him because she suspects that she will hear words of freedom for women spoken by him and after breaking the rules by inviting him she fails to follow through on her hope and falls back into old patterns.

"You are distracted by so many things when really there is just one thing," Jesus says. In this moment there is the one thing.

The one thing. At this moment there is the one thing for Martha and that is hearing the words she longs to hear. Hearing the words of there being no distinction between male and female. Martha had let this thought give her the unconventional courage to invite Jesus but her courage fails. She loses focus on her one thing.

She is partly free of social expectations yet, unlike her sister is not completely free.

Maybe what has originally attracted her to Jesus was the story of the Good Samaritan which breaks conventional understanding by including foreigners, and she is hoping Jesus will also be fully inclusive of women. And he is, but she cannot quite defy social expectations and put down the dish towel and sit at Jesus feet. She has been drawn by the possibility of new freedom yet loses courage.

She is like a slave who has been set free but is fearful of leaving the plantation. She wants freedom yet has not thought through what that would look like.

She actually hears herself asking Jesus to tell her sister to come to the kitchen back to conventional roles. Jesus won't do that.

Jesus won't make people be free, he certainly will not make Mary go back to her regular conventional ways. He is imploring Martha to stay true to her one thing.

The Apostle Paul has told us that in God there is no male or female, slave or free. God does not make such distinctions.

Yet still today we make a distinction between male and female. In most homes both men and women work yet the women still do the housework and raise the children.

In our own country women are still not paid equal money for equal hours at the same work with the same qualifications.

In our world women are demeaned by rape in the Congo and Sudan.

The equality of women is true to God but not to men.

Yet, still, religions use ancient ideas and scriptures to keep women subservient.

Martha is a hero who at first found the courage to go against convention but then her courage failed. She couldn't carry through on her one thing.

Could we all work to get this one thing done for Martha. Could we all consciously work for the freedom of women in our homes and nation and world?

It's God's way.