

“Do You Not Care? Martha, Mary, and the Problem of Evil”  
St. Mary’s Church, Pune, June 17, 2016  
Telford Work, Westmont College

*Lectionary readings: Proverbs 3:13-18, Psalm 63:1-8, Philipians 3:7-14, Luke 10:38-42.*

Today’s passage from Luke’s Gospel came to my mind a couple of days before I received the invitation to preach this weekend. A student in my class in Bangalore had a question. He had read the story of Jephthah sacrificing his daughter in Judges 11. It’s a disturbing story about a foolish and totally preventable evil. My student’s question was this: “Why didn’t God prevent that?”

The discussion quickly turned to a familiar topic: Why doesn’t God prevent *all* evils? Why does our good God allow evils to ruin God’s own good creation?”

As I responded, today’s Gospel reading came to mind. So I was delighted to be invited to preach on it.

Some interpreters like to portray Martha as passive-aggressive. (And she might be.) However, if that were her real problem, Jesus would have responded, “Martha, don’t bring me into your conflicts. You take care of these things yourself.” Jesus does that on one other occasion when a man wants Jesus to get his brother to divide his inheritance justly, but he doesn’t do that here. So that’s not where Martha went wrong.

Some like to portray Martha as selfish and caught up in her own righteousness. But then Jesus would have told her that her complaint was illegitimate. He does that when he compares the prayers of the Pharisee and the publican. But he doesn’t tell her she’s out of line. She has a proper grievance.

Some like to portray Martha as too focused on secular rather than spiritual things. But she is the one who invited Jesus into her house! Besides, Jesus would have responded that she’s been wasting her time and energy and should leave all that domesticity behind and come and follow him. He does tell others that on other occasions, but he doesn’t do it here.

Others want to *defend* Martha. She’s just doing her duty! She’s just trying her best! But then why does Jesus defend Mary instead of her? Martha is on the wrong track. Dangerously so, given his response.

So where *has* Martha gone wrong? Well, in this culture, when you invite someone in, your household takes on serious obligations of hospitality. And she’s following through on those. She’s doing the right thing. *Her sister isn’t*. This reflects poorly on the family. In fact, Martha says her sister has “left” her! Jesus recently explained loving your neighbor with the parable of the Good Samaritan—a story of deep hospitality—and Mary isn’t even loving her sister. Martha is concerned about justice, and a fundamental family bond. She’s noticed that Mary is fixed on Jesus, so she calls for Jesus to intervene for the cause of justice and the peace of the family. Any other time, this would be totally *reasonable*.

[In America, this might be analogous: My adult son comes to visit our house unannounced and with a guest. He knocks on the door. I have to open the door, but I’ve just bathed and I’m wearing only a towel. (A big, modest one.) So I come out and do that. But instead of apologizing and excusing myself to go get dressed, I just sit down right there in my towel with uncombed and wet hair and start up a conversation. And I don’t get up. This would embarrass and offend my son and be uncomfortable to my host, and would put the whole family in a bad light. I can see my son putting up with it for a little

while, hoping I would do the right thing, and then get both frustrated with me and disenchanted with the guest who seems okay to let this travesty go on and on.]

So Martha delivers an outcry to the Lord on behalf of justice against evil.

*Evil?! You're comparing this to the world's grave injustices?* I'm not saying that Mary's irresponsibility is on the same *scale* as the evils that make headlines and history books. Of course not. But the question isn't why God doesn't prevent *big* evils. (How big does evil have to be to become a theological problem? Isn't evil of any size a theological problem?) The question is why God doesn't prevent *evils*.

Besides, if the Bible teaches anything about evil, it is that big evils grow out of small ones. Though little things like this can destroy friendships and families, can't they? Relationships can strain, grudges can grow, words can be said, and a whole new picture of someone can replace the old one. Maybe it's not so trivial. And remember, the originating sin in the garden was eating a piece of fruit.

Here's why I find it so helpful. We usually treat the problem of evil in terms of God's power, God's goodness, human freedom, and God's concern for us, and think that they can't all be true in a world with evil. But none of these are at issue here. Jesus is good; he doesn't reject Martha's concerns but acknowledges them. He has the power to prevent the evil *just by saying something*. It wouldn't take any more than that: "Hey, Mary, I can wait while you help your sister." Mary's freedom isn't a factor; given her respect for him, we all know she would obey. And Jesus is clearly concerned about both of them, even though this is a small matter. How much more is he concerned with large ones like the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:5-6).

So something else is going on. And Jesus actually tells Martha what it is.

Jesus draws a contrast: Mary is focused. Focus is not really a matter of paying *more* attention; it's a matter of paying *less* attention to most things, so that attention *concentrates* on one thing. Martha *seems* focused—on showing hospitality. Is that her problem, that she is focused on the wrong thing? No, because Jesus doesn't tell her that her focus is on the *wrong* thing. It's that she's distracted by *so many*. Martha isn't idolizing hospitality, or herself, or even justice. She is caught up on quite a variety of things: the obligation of hospitality; her sister's refusal to help; her sister's disloyalty; Jesus' refusal to correct the situation; and what this says about Jesus' character and the value of Jesus' teachings. In her agitated state, her mind is racing; racing to bad places.

This all happened because Martha didn't notice something Mary did notice: *Jesus!* I think she went right into hospitality mode, while Mary noticed just who it was in front of her. And that totally rearranged her priorities. She focused on the one who could save her life and her family.

Here's Jesus' answer to Martha's legitimate protest: *Martha, preventing or solving a family crisis is not what I'm doing. Teaching my kingdom is what I'm doing. Mary is focused where I am. That's the good item in your frame to focus on. In fact, it's the only one that truly lasts.*

See, when I ask why God doesn't prevent the death of Jephthah's daughter, or any other easily preventable evil, I'm also questioning God's focus. I want God to be doing *this thing* about an evil situation, and really *this and that and some other thing about every evil situation*—from something as trivial as Mary setting aside her obligations to something as world-changing as the Holocaust. Why doesn't he?

That can be a great question to ask, if I ask it in a way that's open to hearing Jesus' answer. But if I ask it Martha's way—"Do you not care?"—it's really a rhetorical question that thinks the answer is already obvious: "No, Martha, I don't. I don't care." Or

else Jesus has to cater to Martha's wounded ego with assurances that he cares after all. Either way, she can continue in the victim's role she seems to be taking on. He has a better way for her.

Jesus' answer lines up with the whole Bible's answer: All along God has been doing something *besides* preventing the fall in Eden, or the death of Jephthah's daughter, or a family rift between Martha and Mary, or Israel's apostasy, exile, and destruction. It's not that he doesn't care, or isn't good, or doesn't have the power, or that we're free to go against him anyway. It's just that he is focused on one necessary thing. In life's complicated and distracting picture, the Messiah and his purpose are the one eternal and good and critical detail.

So other things take lower priority. Even important and right things.<sup>1</sup>

Here are a few similar situations from my own life:

One day I was leaving the hospital after visiting a student, with just enough time to make it to an appointment with another student. On my way out a woman caught my attention. As I remember, she needed help in using her cell phone. It turned out that she had just found out she had cancer, and probably only had months left to live. She didn't know how to break it to family members who were depending on her. There was no way I could just leave. So I intentionally stood up my student. I apologized to him later, and as I predicted he understood completely.

However, another day I was in a meeting with a student in my office. Near the end of our conversation a topic came up that called for immediate follow-up. But it was almost time for my next appointment, with a different student and friend who was fragile and in real emotional pain. I did the one necessary thing, extended the conversation, and left the fragile student waiting. She was really upset with me. She interpreted my action just like Martha: "Do you not care?" It took a while to repair that damage. But I did the right thing, and I'd do it again. In fact, it was a teachable moment for her, and she learned something important about love.

If I am mystified that God doesn't stop evil or grant just requests, then I have something to learn about him. But if I'm not *satisfied*, then I think it means I really want God to be like Martha. I want God to be concerned with everything all at once. I want God's purpose to be keeping everything good all the time, at least for me and maybe for everyone, *instead of* the purpose that God actually demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

But God is like Mary. God has always been focused on the one necessary thing: For the Lord Jesus to live, suffer, rise, reign, and return to put all wrong to an end forever. That is the Lord's own answer to the problem of evil, and to the particular evils that you and I care so much about.

Mary can live with that. Can I? Can you? Can we stay focused where God has been eternally focused?

It's not easy. About ten years ago, evil blew right into my family like a hurricane, and it nearly destroyed us. And though we're recovering, recovery wasn't a sure thing. A little change here or there could have taken the life of one or more of our children. It nearly happened. Marriages and families almost never recover from such a thing. It *does* happen to others, so as far as the problem of evil is concerned, it might as well have happened to us.

The thought horrifies me. Can I trust in a God who is focused elsewhere besides preventing all that from happening?

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<sup>1</sup> This is Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical."

Well, I have to, don't I? Because (a) there's no good alternative, and (b) God *has* proven himself totally trustworthy in Jesus. So yes, I can live with it.

Mary is right. Jesus wants Martha to see it. First of all, it's the truth, and we don't get to pick another truth we like better. But more importantly, if Martha doesn't see it and trust in it, what will happen to her? Her life will still be a whirlwind, with Jesus losing competitions for priority. He warned that people like that choke out the growth of the word in a person and kill it. Martha's mind will keep racing to wrong conclusions. Her theology will stay stuck on a god who doesn't care even if he *could* help.

Jesus *does* care about her. "Martha, *Martha*," he says. He stops and tries to get her to pause and focus. And to hear that he does know and care, but not in the way she is demanding.

[Today's other readings agree with Jesus and Mary:]

[Paul's heart is torn over whether he even wants to keep living his difficult life as an apostle, and he's in agony over beloved fellow Jews who still reject the Messiah, and he's frustrated with false teachers who are convincing Christ-followers to put their trust in ethnicity instead of his grace. What will happen if he gives up Mary's way of setting everything aside to focus on Christ and instead follows Martha's train of thought and asks, "Do you not care?" What will happen to him? What will happen to his ministry?]

[Psalm 63 is set when King David is in the wilderness. God is his oasis, his desert feast, his only love, and his constant protection. What will happen if he loses his focus on the Lord? He'll still be in the desert, but without food, drink, love, or protection. And what happens to people in that situation? What will happen to David's kingdom and royal line?]

[In Proverbs 3, a father is urging his son to set wisdom above every worldly treasure. What if the son doesn't? What will happen to him if he doesn't focus there? What will happen to their family? I can tell you, because that's how the evil blew into our family ten years ago.]

[Here is a more hopeful question: What will happen to Martha if she grasps what saying is saying and focuses where Mary and he [and the others] do? What might happen not only in her soul but her life, her family, her ministry, and the lives of those around her? Remember, she invited Jesus in. That's a *great* start. All she needs to do now is let him reorder her whole life. Imagine who she could *then* become in his kingdom!

Mary, Paul, David, and Solomon can live with Jesus' answer to Martha. In fact, they realize their lives depend on that answer. *Yes, the Lord does care: about Martha's family ... mine ... yours ... and all the families of the earth.* But he has been caring in a certain way. A focused way. A fruitful way. The one necessary way. And a self-sacrificial way at that. He has secured it with his own blood, and it can never ever be taken away.

Let's *live* with that. Let's rejoice over it.