



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Luke 10:38-42

Background of the reading

Luke is the only gospel writer who tells us this remarkable story in just a few lines. It is as if he deliberately leaves his readers to use their imaginations to fill in the details of the story. He does not tell us where the village was or any other details of the women or why Jesus chose this house in particular. It is only in the Gospel of John that we learn that they had a brother by the name of Lazarus and that they stayed in the village called Bethany. If it was Bethany it was just 2 miles from Jerusalem on the south-eastern side of the slope of the Mount of Olives. It is also in John's Gospel that we read that Mary poured some expensive oil on Jesus' feet.

We must be very careful not to read their story with our post-modern eyes, because if we do this, we will wonder what Martha's problem was – of course Mary was right to sit and listen to the Lord rather than helping her sister with the household chores!

But in order to really understand what happened there, we need to understand what the world looked like and how things worked in those days.

The first thing we have to keep in mind, is that a good name was worth gold in those days. Although we don't really care what others think of us today, in those days other people's opinion of you determined your social standing. Thus, nobody would ever deliberately do something out with the bounds of the rules of society, because that would not only cause themselves shame, but also their whole family.

Secondly, as I have mentioned in previous sermons, men and women lived in 2 different spheres of society. Men were always in public, while the household was the women's responsibility. And nobody ever dared cross these lines, because that would result in a bad name.

In other words, a woman who managed her household well, who was always hospitable and neat and who made sure that her guests had enough to eat and were comfortable, was an asset to her family. Such a woman would have a good name.

And Martha was such a woman. Somebody who knew her responsibilities as a woman and who always acted appropriately.

Mary, on the other hand, disobeyed the rules of society. To sit at the feet of your Lord and listen to his teachings, was solely the privilege of men. It was outside of the women's sphere, and by doing that Mary was treading on forbidden terrain.

According to the rules of their society, Martha was thus the person who acted correctly, while Mary was the disobedient one.

Because Jesus also knew the rules of society very well, Martha asked him to please tell Mary to stop acting inappropriately and to start doing her share. But much to Martha's surprise, Jesus did not tell Mary off, but her!

Jesus told Martha that he knew she was busy with important work, but that there were things that were even *more* important than doing what society expected of you, and *this*, Mary realized.

Mary didn't care about her good name and the consequences of her actions, because she realized that it is far more enriching to listen to Jesus – and what better opportunity to do that than while he was at home with them?

Reflection and meaning of the reading

The text verses for the sermon are:

⁴¹“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

I think that there is a very important lesson for each of us to learn from this story.

Jesus taught Martha that she had to see the bigger picture. He didn't tell her to become a bad host or to neglect her duties as a woman. He only told her that NOTHING is more important than a relationship with God.

Even if this means that other people's opinion of you might change, that is not supposed to bother you, because if you make God and your relationship with him your 1st priority, then everything else will automatically fall into the right places.

Mary's priorities were right, but Martha did not realize that, because she focussed on what the people around her regarded as right and wrong. By trying so hard to never do something wrong, Martha almost made the biggest mistake of her whole life, namely to let the opportunity pass by to sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him, like a real disciple.

We must be very careful not to make the same mistake she did. Do you remember how much easier it is to clean a room when you have to study for an exam or have a deadline at your work, even though you usually detest cleaning? Well, that's what Marthas do.

We can so easily be blinded by what is right by the people around us – we would knowingly do things that we don't really agree with just not to be left out, some people climb the corporate ladder with such a speed, they don't even realize how many people they hurt on their way up, others spend so much time feeling sorry for themselves, that they eventually cannot see a single good thing in their lives, and I could go on and on like this...

But people who live like this, are so busy filling their lives with the unimportant stuff, that there will later be no space left for God. And what sense is there in a life without God?

So – let's get up in the mornings and immediately start with the important things. Let's work on our relationships with God and live out what we believe – by *making* time for our fellow believers, our family, our friends, by caring for others, by living a healthy life, by doing the small things that can make a big difference in the world. Let us forget about all the worries and the people who drag us down. Let us focus in faith on God and what He expects us to do.

Because if we do all of this, our dirty houses will get cleaned up in the long run, our desks will get sorted out and our plates will be filled with food.

People who do things in the right order, are people whose lives turn out to be full to the brim – full of joy, love, and eternal peace. May the Lord help us to discern the important things in life from the unimportant bits!

Amen