

We can be both

Luke10:38-42 Amanda Gorman "Memorial" from *Call us what we carry*

Rev J Shannon

Let me ask you something. In the olden days when we used to have people around for dinner...was there a time when the conversation turned to politics or there was a tense moment on the tip of a family dispute when you (or someone else) suddenly decided the table just *had* to be cleared? Up they'd jump and suddenly there was colour and movement. (Also a great way to tell your guests it is time to leave.)

Ah, Martha – you just chose to be busy.

In most readings, Martha gets a bad rap taken from Jesus' final words, "Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her." People hear the first part of that sentence but they never seem to hear the last..."and it will not be taken away from her".

In my childhood, Southern Baptist ministers pretzelled themselves to somehow invert this reading because they wanted women in the kitchen - *not* in the seminaries. This was one of the many things that tickled my understanding and drove me away from the church.

Call me contrary, but I always read this as a feminist passage. Jesus was supporting equality and scholarship – not denigrating Martha but telling her she had a choice.

You see, woman of that time rarely had choices. They did not have access to education unless their families provided it, at home. While there were a few women who could read and write, access to materials was limited to permission from their fathers and husbands.¹

Martha and Mary are the householders. Not their brother Lazarus. He lives with them. They are independent women. My colleague argued that Martha had no choice but to be in the kitchen – who else was going to feed all those people out there!?! I chuckled. As householders, they would have had staff. Households employed a number of people to help with daily chores like gathering firewood and cooking.

¹ For an interesting fictional read, *The Book of Longings* by Sue Monk Kidd. (2020) a story of a literate woman in Jesus' time.

No, Martha chose to be in the kitchen. While her sister was rapt in learning...something not normally open to women. She sat at His feet with all the disciples. Think about it. Even in modern middle eastern homes today, the women most often eat in another room. Men and women, not related, sitting in the same room, learning!!! That was unheard of...but there it is in scripture.

Last week, I asked, “what gets in your way? What is stopping you?” and we could ask the same of Martha.

Perhaps it was too intellectual for her – and she felt inadequate.

Perhaps it was too radical for her – all those men and women in one room. Not comfortable!

Perhaps she was a little bit of a perfectionist or control freak and didn't think the servants could create a meal fit for a king without her supervision.

Perhaps what he was asking required introspection, reflection and self-assessment and she didn't want to go there.

All this is conjecture but does any of it ring true? When have you jumped up and busied yourself because you were uncomfortable?

Amanda Gorman said, “only now can Memory, previously marooned, find safe harbour within us. Free all these tales...” How else can we learn from them?

“Poke a scar until it speaks” – if we don't listen, if we are not willing to evaluate what we did and when, how can we grow to understand ourselves as God does?

Are we afraid, maybe like Martha to learn new, challenging things?

But let's not join the voices dumping on Martha because the world *needs* doers and thinkers. It is true that good supervision provides great outcomes. Just as it is true, thoughtfulness and imagination fosters innovation. There is a time for everything. (sound familiar?)

I used to tell my students, ‘Managers do things right and leaders do the right thing.’

A leader is outside the business, imagining and evaluating a big picture in a global context. A manager is down in the weeds counting, inspecting, mindful of the rules, supervising details so things do not go wrong.

The world needs both. I do not want a leader in charge of my tax return. She will visualise all the things that are wrong with the system and get the maths wrong. I want a manager. A company, especially a large company – especially a

church, *needs* a leader, a visionary – someone who can imagine a different future – not what we are doing today. Christ was a visionary. Paul was a manager.

I had hoped to train students to know when to be which, in what context. You are not fixed in your state – unless you choose to be static. You can stay in the kitchen or you can fill your universe with ideas. I said that week, we do not live in a binary world. It is not an either/or: Martha *or* Mary. It is a when to be one, or the other, with permission and full knowledge that you have chosen to be...not compelled.

In Christ's world, you can be both.

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