

Today this lesson continues the Sanctified Arts series looking at the in-between places and spaces in our lives. There is something in human nature that finds it easier, perhaps even more comfortable, to think in black and white terms. The trouble is people are messy. The forces that are all around us make us even messier. Let's hope I don't make a mess of this lesson from Jesus about faith and works. Okay let's hope I don't make a total, confusing mess about this story.

Thinking and being in the in-between spaces isn't easy for most. I remember in one of my seminary classes during a discussion when I suggested that maybe this could be and / both rather than either / or, that the professor looked at me like "poor pitiful mind that just can't be" and continued to tell me how he was correct and I was not. I have had discussions with other Christians about various subjects and when I suggested the answer wasn't as cut and dry as they wanted they gave me the vibe I was some sort of confused heretic. This trait has made my Dad wonder about the state of my eternal soul. Be warned if you are willing to live with the tension of and / both versus either / or that people will misunderstand you. Remember you will be in good company. That happened to Jesus all the time.

We do need the dualistic mind to function in practical life, to do our work as a teacher, a nurse, a scientist, or an engineer. It's helpful and fully necessary as far as it goes, but it just doesn't go far enough. The dualistic mind cannot process things like infinity, mystery, God, grace, suffering, sexuality, death, or love; this is exactly why most people stumble over these very issues.

The cool thing is while people want you to pick a side, for whatever reason that might benefit them, Jesus is always in all spaces. There can be many things that make us feel like we are living in a divided space. That we are also in un-defined spaces. Yet, it is there that God wants us to know God is there. God accepts us as we try to live a faithful life in the beauty of the love God wants us to share with each other.

I like the challenge of trying to craft a good picture with my camera. If you are a photographer you are well aware that often the most beautiful pictures are in the space between night and day. That we are often drawn to natural spaces in-between such as beaches that are between water and land. There is beauty in those between places. There can be beauty in the between spaces we all live in, that God knows we live in, and that God lives in.

I have a mindfulness practice I do almost every morning. One of the concepts is “beginner's mind”. A beginner's mind is a way of being open, curious, and receptive to new experiences, without preconceptions. You cultivate a beginner's mind by:

- **Clear your mind:** Before starting a new task, try to let go of judgments and expectations.
- **Observe children:** Consider how children approach new activities.
- **Let go of ego:** Try to avoid being attached to how things should be. Don't “should” on yourself.
- **Be curious:** Seek out new experiences and interesting situations.
- **Take it one step at a time:** Don't worry about having everything planned out.
- **View risks as experimentation:** Novel experiences can lead to learning.

## Benefits of a beginner's mind

- A beginner's mind can help you avoid being closed-minded or thinking you're an expert.
- It can help you enjoy the present moment and make new discoveries.
- It can help you approach situations with fresh eyes.

I hope to help you experience this story with a beginner's mind.

Today we are looking at the spaces in between faith and works. This subject has long caused stress in the church. Martin Luther was about faith. It is even said he wished the book of James was not part of the New Testament, which has an emphasis on “works without faith is dead”.

Not only is how to live out our lives in the spaces between faith and works a challenge, even the words we use can be a challenge. Or maybe how the original speaker of those words, Jesus, meant us to hear and understand the message behind this story about Mary and Martha. Many translations created the either / or of faith and works, when they made the translation say “Mary has chosen the better part”.

Interesting how today our society places such value on the Martha's, the doers, to make money for them. We are pressured all around to be doers. We absorb the message our self-worth is tied to our doing. I bet I am not the only person whose self-worth has taken a beating because there was a time when they couldn't “do”.

Can I get an amen?

In a culture of the relentless pursuit of productivity, we are tempted to measure our worth by how busy we are, by how much we accomplish, or by how well we meet the expectations of others.

Maybe you can identify with Martha. Feeling pulled in different directions, feeling worried and distracted by many things. These seem to be common in our world. And yet, as Jesus says in Luke 12:25, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” We know that worrying does no good, and that much of what we worry about is not so important in the larger scheme of things, and yet we cannot seem to quell our anxious thoughts and frantic activity.

There is real and intrinsic value in works. We all can “doers” in various ways and at various times in our lives. What we might need is that beginner's mind to envision what doing means.

Martha sometimes gets belittled for the real and faithful tasks she devoted herself to because of the way so many translations read “the better part”. Also sometimes we might have been led to think, or believe, that because many translations repeat Martha’s name twice that Jesus was frustrated rather than being tender.

The term used for tasks that we often link with what Martha was doing is diakonia meaning service or ministry. Think modern church council members, deacons, trustees. The readers of Luke would have been familiar with the house - church service Martha was doing while Mary was sitting with Jesus.

Hospitality is exceedingly important in the biblical world in general. When Jesus comes to Bethany, Martha demonstrates hospitality by welcoming Jesus into the home she shares with her sister Mary. She then busies herself with the tasks of serving their guest (*diakonian*). Although we are not told precisely what those tasks are, a good guess is that she began preparing a meal.

Meanwhile her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to his words. Rather than assuming the role expected of women in her culture, she takes her place at the feet of Jesus. She assumes the posture of a student learning at the feet of a rabbi, a role traditionally reserved for men. Mary certainly has a real comfort level with Jesus. It might have come from previous visits and Mary's level of deep listening to Jesus.

Martha's also has a real comfort level with Jesus. She breaks the rules of hospitality by trying to embarrass her sister and maybe therefore shaming Mary into helping out in the manner Martha expects. She even goes so far as to accuse Jesus of not caring about her "Lord, do you not care".

We can picture both Mary and Martha routinely doing the service that, in this story, only Martha is doing. Jesus' visit could likely have disrupted their normal relationship. If you were Martha could you understand how she decided to go to Jesus and ask him to get Mary to help out like both of them usually do? Neither Martha or Mary are finding a balance with the potential between places. Mary

could have helped with the tasks, the sisters could have rotated out. Mary could have asked her sister to sit with her and remind her that some of the tasks could wait or maybe be delegated. As Proverbs states there is a time for everything. Just because you always did something the same way most of the time, maybe if now and again you stepped back and looked at the situation with a beginner's mind you could find a better and/ both space.

Jesus' words to Martha may be seen as an invitation rather than a rebuke. Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. The one thing needed is for Martha to receive the gracious presence of Jesus, to listen to his words, to know that she is valued not for what she does or how well she does it, but for who she is to God.

“Mary has chosen the better part.” When you look at the Greek, however, it can also be translated as, “a good portion” or “a useful share.” In light of this, I believe Jesus is not offering a value judgment between them, but assuaging both Mary and Martha's that they both doing a good portion of the work for the kingdom of God.

I wonder if Martha was concerned about what might happen to Mary for being out of “her place.” Jesus' response is radical because he affirms Mary has chosen a good portion of the work, and even though she is not where she is expected to be, no one can take that away from her. Jesus protects her right to assume the position of a disciple.

The problem with Martha is not that she is busy serving and providing hospitality. Certainly Jesus commends this kind of service to our neighbor many times. He did in the parable of the Good Samaritan that immediately precedes this story of Mary and Martha. The problem with Martha is not her serving, but rather that she is worried and distracted. The word translated “distracted” in verse 40, *periespato*, has the connotation of being pulled or dragged in different directions.

Maybe Jesus was feeling the pressure of knowing his time on earth was short. Jesus knew there would be time for doing. Which in the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus focuses on. Here, it appears Jesus is asking Martha to slow down, be present, not be filled with distraction and worry. For Mary and Martha to not be dualistic in their faith and works. That way when it is time to take action Jesus’s disciples will know what to do because they were like Mary and sat and listened.

Maybe we can choose the better part of not judging the actions of others through our dualistic mind, but maybe rather with a beginner's mind, or best of all the heart and mind of Jesus. Jesus who knows we are messy and that we live in the “between” places.

Now is the time to listen and look around and see what difference the Kingdom of God is making in your life and maybe, how your life needs to change, if even for a time, because of it.

Both listening and doing, receiving God's Word and serving others, are vital to the Christian life, just as inhaling and exhaling are to breathing. Yet how often do we forget to breathe in deeply? Trying to serve without being nourished by God's word is like expecting good fruit to grow from a tree that has been uprooted.