

“Tangled in Triangles”

Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

This is a familiar text and if you’ve heard it before you’ve probably been asked whether you are a “Martha” or a “Mary” in your faith, that is, whether you are more of a “do-er” or more of a “contemplative.”

While it can be a worthy endeavor to think about our preferred approach and personality in terms of how we love God and love others, faith is all about balancing both the “doing” and the “being” approach, not choosing one over the other. We need not pit Martha over and against Mary – Lord knows plenty of people have been doing that for years.

Today, I invite us to look at this text a bit differently. Rather than reading it as a lesson on how we are to “worship like Mary” or “serve like Martha” in the presence of Jesus, I’d like us to see what we can learn from the very human thing that happens here. The very human “distraction” about which Jesus speaks: *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by*

many things, there is need of only one thing,” (Luke 10:41a).

What is this distraction? What is it that is keeping from Martha from focusing on what really matters? Well, I don’t think it’s the “distractions” of how many pots there are to wash or how many table settings are left to put out or how many salads need to be dished up. It’s not the distractions of the tasks Martha has on her to-do list of what needs to be done to feed this unexpected group of guests in her home. After all, Jesus and his band of disciples are familiar with receiving hospitality and I don’t think Jesus would have thought it a distraction to get food in his belly. Could it be that the main distraction Martha has is that she is worried about what her sister is doing (or rather, *not* doing) instead of just worrying about herself and her own actions?

Even more, it’s one thing to wish that your sister would be

in the kitchen helping you out – it’s a whole other thing to go out and complain about it to your guest – to Jesus of all people! (And Jesus is an authority figure, which makes the stakes even higher in terms of the implications of Martha’s words!) What if Jesus is saying that Martha’s distraction is that she essentially is a tattletale to Jesus about Mary? While Mary is sitting right there! And it doesn’t make it any better if Mary had gotten up for a minute to run to the bathroom or something and that’s when Martha runs in to Jesus to make her move and say, *“Look Jesus – I’m doing all the work here – tell Mary to help me!”*

Whether it’s right in front of Mary’s face or behind Mary’s back – essentially Martha is telling Jesus about her problem with her sister Mary instead of speaking directly to Mary herself about it. She wants Jesus to step in and “fix it” and “justify her view”; she wants Jesus to take her side; she wants Jesus to tell Mary what to do so that Mary can see just how “right” Martha is in all of this. I’ve always kind of cringed at this text, because as relatable as it is, it reminds me

of how childlike my own actions are at times. Because this exchange feels like a classic scene from a playground: *“Teacher, Joey won’t let me on the swing...he’s been on there 20 minutes and he won’t get off. Tell him to get off; tell him it’s my turn.”*

In a recent episode of the podcast *This American Life* called “No Fair!”, the host, Ira Glass, tells the story about a preschool teacher who realizes one day she’s spending half of her time every day dealing with kids’ tattling on their friends. So she has the brilliant idea to install a “tattle phone” on the wall, which is essentially a Kleenex box on the wall with a fake phone receiver on it. And it works! The kids actually speak into the phone.

One of the preschooler’s fathers is a researcher himself and finds this idea fascinating and decides to contact the parents to see if it’s okay to actually put a recording device in the fake phone and record the kid’s tattles. He discovers that the kids tattle about everything: from stuff that happens at home, to what happens at recess or at craft time or at play

time, etc. The kids are using the phone a lot.

At one point he interviews the kids to see how they felt about the tattle phone. One boy said it made him feel good because “I got to tell on the person.” Another girl said “speaking into the phone felt like eating ice cream.” One boy, though, insisted that the phone didn’t work...that it didn’t do anything. When the dad said, “Yes it did...it listened to your tattle.” The boy insisted, “No it didn’t; it didn’t work. It didn’t stop Auggie from pinching me.”¹

Ah. And there it is. The truth. Tattling may make us feel good temporarily but it doesn’t actually stop a behavior that we don’t like from happening if we never talk to the person who is perpetuating that behavior directly. If we can learn as children that tattling doesn’t work...then why do we keep doing some version of that as adults?

We do it in our families:

“I know, Carol. It’s not fair that Mark is not helping out at all with dad’s care. It should be the responsibility of all three of us kids. He’s being so selfish. How can he do this to us? To Dad?”

It happens at work:

“Can you believe what Bob said in that meeting! He doesn’t even have the right data to back up his claims.”

“Stan, I need your help. Steve is not pulling his weight on our team. He is late on his deadlines and his work is incomplete. He’s dragging us all down. You’re the boss. Do something. Talk to him. It’s not fair to the rest of us.”

It happens in the church too:

“I don’t understand why that committee decided that. Why didn’t they consult us or ask me what I thought about that?”

“Can you believe he said that from the pulpit?”

¹ Ira Glass, “No Fair!” *This American Life* (April 5, 2019), accessed on July 21, 2019 at <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/672/no-fair>.

“Pastor, I know there’s probably nothing you can do about this, but it really bothers me when this congregation member does such and such. And it’s not just me. It bothers others too. Can you do something about that? I know it’s a touchy subject...but it’s your job to deal with this stuff.”

All of these are examples of triangulation. And triangulation erodes trust. Simply put, *“Triangulation is talking about feelings, opinions, or personal issues regarding some person or group with a third party instead of with the person or group actually concerned.”*²

(Use three sheep figures as visuals here)

A has an issue with B. And because direct communication might feel tense or uncomfortable for A, A doesn’t go to B, instead A goes to C and either vents their issue to them just to complain and get it off their chest, or maybe A goes to C to have C actually go and talk to B for them or to “do something about it.”

² From an article, “Cleaning up Bad Communication Habits,” adapted from *Healthy Disclosure: Solving Communication Quandaries in Congregations*, copyright © 2007, the Alban Institute. Accessed on July

Either way – it’s triangulating. And it’s unhealthy and unhelpful, and utterly unfair.

It’s unfair to B, for sure, because they are left out of the loop and in the case of just being talked about behind their back will never know how their words or actions impacted A. Plus – how do you feel when you find out people are talking about you?

It’s unfair to C because it’s giving them a perception of B that has nothing to do with their personal experience with B and it’s putting B in a position to respond to something which they didn’t experience themselves.

And it’s unfair to A, because A is denying themselves the opportunity to find resolution on the issue or complaint and actually work something out so that A and B can move forward together, and so that this doesn’t keep happening.

When A has a problem with B and goes to C to tell them about

21, 2019 at <https://alban.org/archive/cleaning-up-bad-communication-habits/>.

it or get them involved, it forms a triangle. And when that triangle forms – it tangles everyone up in resentment, misunderstandings, and unfair situations. Triangulation kills relationships, because it kills trust.

And more often than not, triangles multiply. When one is formed, others start forming quickly. It becomes a culture. A culture of unhealthy complaining instead of a culture of healthy confrontation and conflict resolution. And it is contrary to the gospel of incarnation...God coming to be with humans in human form, face to face, in direct communication – no interceding, no mediator!

In our story today, Martha has an issue with Mary. Instead of speaking to Mary about it directly, she goes to Jesus. And her approach to Jesus is three-fold:

1) to call Jesus into question – “*Lord do you not care...*” This serves to create a feeling of guilt for Jesus so that he will “fall for” her triangulation; she’s making it sound as if it is

‘his duty’ to care about this and do something about it.

2) to complain about Mary – “*that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?*” This is the actual moment of triangulation – even if it’s just venting – Martha has officially brought Mary into the conversation.

3) to demand that he intervene on her behalf: “*Tell her then to help me.*” This is a full-fledged ask for Jesus to get involved on Martha’s behalf and take part in triangulation.

Martha is upset. She probably regrets her actions later, as well all do. She certainly doesn’t get the response she wants. She wants Jesus to say, “*You are right Martha – you are working hard and you Mary should be helping you. I’m sorry I didn’t see how unfair this is to you. Mary, please go help your sister and apologize to her that you were just sitting here with me instead of helping.*”

Instead – what does Jesus say? He says, “*Martha you are distracted; there is need of only one thing.*” Jesus addresses Martha directly, which is the

best thing you can do when you find yourself being triangulated into a situation. Don't address the other person brought up, focus on who is speaking to you and their feelings and their actions and how you can help them help themselves.

I feel like in this moment Jesus is saying to Martha, *"This is not your sister's issue. This is your issue."* The distraction Jesus is highlighting is that Martha is bringing this to him instead of dealing directly with Mary. I appreciate this part of Jesus' answer. He is trying to de-triangulate himself from the situation by talking directly to Martha.

The second part of his response I have mixed feelings about. Jesus says, *"Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her,"* (Luke 10:42). Because he mentions Mary, he kind of falls into the triangle that Martha invited him into. I don't think he gets full-fledged tangled up in it, but he definitely falls into it.

On the one hand, it seems like Jesus could have just kept the conversation focused on Martha

without bringing up Mary at all. That would be the perfect situation in terms of not getting triangulated into the conversation.

On the other hand, maybe Jesus thought he needed to stick up for Mary in that moment or maybe he thought that was the best way for Martha to look at her own behavior. We don't know Jesus' motivations; they were probably mixed.

Remember, Jesus is only human too and he's reacting in the moment, it's not like he had hours to thoughtfully craft his response.

I do wish Jesus had just stuck to dealing with Martha without bringing up Mary, or at the very least, said to Martha, *"This is not my problem to work out; you need to speak to Mary about this; I cannot help you resolve your feelings about her."*

Because here's the thing – while Jesus could maybe make Martha feel better about herself by agreeing that Mary needed to be helping her OR while Jesus could maybe help Martha be redirecting her attention to herself and her own behaviors

which is all she can control – Jesus is never going to be able to resolve Martha’s feelings about Mary. No matter what he says. Only Martha can resolve that with Mary. Direct communication is the only way that healing can come.

We see in the gospels that Jesus can heal a lot of things. Jesus can help us forgive a lot of people – including ourselves. But Jesus cannot build or restore our relationships for us. He can give us courage and strength when we have a difficult conversation ahead, and we can even practice that conversation with him in prayer, but he cannot have that conversation for us. We have to talk to one another. Not about one another – but *to* one another.

This is such a basic thing – straightforward, direct, communication. But it is so hard. Because we are afraid. We aren’t taught how to express our feelings in this way and we often make things personal when they are not personal. And because we don’t want to hurt people’s feelings and because we often don’t want to take responsibility for

our feelings or we don’t want to expend the energy to deal with someone directly (for whatever reason) – so what ends up happening is that we expend so much more energy by talking other people about the person we have an issue with to see if they agree with us. If they do we start to feel like people agree, then perceived “sides” start to form, all the while the person on the other so-called “side” has no idea there are even sides to begin with! They’re completely out of the loop.

What if there was a different way? What if we weren’t afraid to talk to one another openly and directly? What if we believed and trusted that each one of us has good and Godly intentions in what we want for this community and how we understand the gospel?

Can we trust that we may disagree with one another but that we all want the best for our community? Can we acknowledge that we are all human and we will hurt one another, but we worship and follow a God of forgiveness and with God’s strength and Christ’s teaching we can

believe that forgiveness is possible with one another if we talk openly with one another?

Probably the most important question is this: Whether at church, at work, or at home, can we honor the belovedness of each person in our life by giving them the dignity of going to them directly if there's something we need to talk with them about?

We can, if we put in the work. We can, if we acknowledge that we will mess up and it will be hard.

We can, if we realize that there is good news in getting untangled from these triangles...the very good news that Jesus shows us in today's text.

The truth is we can all relate to this situation. We've all been Martha – the one creating the triangle. We've all been Jesus – the one who is being pulled into the triangle. And we've all been Mary – the one who doesn't even know the triangle is being formed until word gets back to us later from Jesus or until

Martha finally talks to her directly. Or maybe she'll never know, and Martha will always carry a resentment or opinion about Mary that colors their future interactions and Mary will never understand why Martha is always so frustrated with her.

We've all been there. Hopefully, because we've all been there, we can all experience the good news of this situation too. One pastor interprets this passage in this hope-filled way, “When Jesus says that Mary’s desire to learn and grow in faith is good and important and something to value, Jesus is setting a boundary with Martha. A boundary about being drawn into her conflict with her sister. When Jesus pushes back against Martha’s request, is not because he is judging her choice of activity. Jesus is refusing to be drawn into a conflict between two others. Jesus is trying his best not to be triangulated.”³

“When Jesus refuses to be triangulated, it means that God

³ Rev. Erik Parker, “The Gospel of Avoiding Triangulation,” *The Millennial Pastor* (July 17, 2016), accessed on July 21, 2019 at

<https://millennialpastor.net/2016/07/17/the-gospel-of-avoiding-triangulation/>.

will not be distant from us, that God makes no obstacles for our salvation, that God does not operate through intermediaries. Rather God deals directly with us. God does not talk about our salvation with someone else, but deals directly with us.”⁴

“When Jesus refuses to get involved with Martha and Mary’s issue today, Jesus is showing us something much more important about how God deals with us. And that is, that God deals with us directly.”⁵

“God speaks to us directly through God’s word.

God renews and blesses us directly in the waters of baptism.

God feeds us directly in the bread and wine of the Lord’s supper.

God saves us directly and personally, not through works or laws or prayers or righteousness, but through grace.”⁶

God loves us directly and unconditionally.

Today, we might wonder if we are Marys or Marthas, we might feel like both. Sometimes we talk about others behind their backs, sometimes it happens to us. But there is no question about how Jesus deals with us. Directly. Uniquely. Jesus deals with us for who he knows us to be, not in relation to how anyone else sees us or experiences us.

In her distractions about how her sister is not doing what she wants her to do, Martha is showing love neither to Jesus, nor to Mary, nor to herself. In asking Martha to choose the one needful thing – to focus on herself and her own relationships with him. Jesus invites Martha back into community. He does not command. He does not shame. He invites. He gives a choice. *“Come into the living room, Martha, he says. I want to be with you. Will you choose me? In choosing me, you will also gain back your sister. In choosing me, you may see your*

⁴ Parker, *ibid.*

⁵ Parker, *ibid.*

⁶ Parker, *ibid.*

way clear to loving yourself, as well as your neighbor.”⁷

Sometimes when we don’t know how to deal with someone else, we just need to spend some time in prayer with Jesus. We need time to cool off, time to pray, time to think about what really matters and how to talk about our concern with the person it directly relates to.

“Luke’s story is left suspended. We do not know what happened next -- whether Mary and Martha were reconciled, whether they were all able to enjoy the meal that Martha had prepared, whether Martha was finally able to sit and give her full attention to Jesus (and not worry about her sister). We do know that Jesus invites all of us who are worried and distracted by so many things and so many people to sit and rest in his presence, to hear his words of grace and truth, to know that we are loved and valued as children of God, to be renewed in faith and

strengthened for service. There is need of only one thing: attention to our guest. As it turns out, our guest is also our host, with abundant gifts to give.”⁸

And when we focus on the gifts that God has given us to have, then we start to untangle from these triangles naturally. Because when we focus on God’s gifts...we see *each other* as gifts...worthy of direct communication, honesty, and truth.

Amen.

⁷ Amy Richter, “Not Mary or Martha,” *Amy and Joe Go to Africa* (Oct. 10, 2018), accessed on July 21, 2019 at <https://amyandjoegotoafrica.com/2018/10/10/not-mary-or-martha/>.

⁸ Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Luke 10:38-42,” *WorkingPreacher.org* (July 21, 2013), accessed on July

21, 2019 at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1723.