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Mary, Martha, and the “Good Part”

A Feminist Evaluation of the Glorification of Sacrifice in Latter-day Saint Culture

Honorable Mention

In the House of Mary and Martha

IN THE TENTH CHAPTER OF LUKE, JESUS CHRIST VISITS THE home of sisters Mary and Martha. While Mary sits at the Savior’s feet and listens to his words, Martha bustles about doing what she thinks is her duty, serving others (*The Holy Bible*, Luke 10:38-42). When she complains to Christ that her sister is not helping her with the work, He will not instruct Mary to leave his side, instead telling Martha that her sister has chosen the good part.

In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, many different interpretations of this story have been presented in Church magazines, journals, and sessions of General Conference. Some see the verses as a study in priorities and the danger of losing focus on what is most important, others as a cautionary tale warning against judging others and believing we know better than our fellowmen. For example, in the January 1987 issue of the *Ensign*, chairman of the Relief Society curriculum writing committee Evelyn T. Marshall suggested that Christ’s discontentment with Martha stemmed from her overcomplication of the meal she was preparing—that perhaps Martha was “placing more emphasis on the food than on the person she would serve” (Marshall). Brent L. Top, professor and associate dean of religion at BYU, agreed in his 2001 *Religious Educator* article, saying the episode teaches us what matters most in life and warns against losing sight of our primary objectives (Top 47). Catherine Corman Parry, an associate professor of English at Brigham Young University

(BYU) at the time of her devotional address in May 1991, said that Martha’s “self-importance” in her judgment of her sister was what prompted the Lord’s rebuke, not her work itself (Parry).

Upon examination of the majority of Latter-day Saint interpretations, we see the focus is generally placed on avoiding the sins of pride or selfishness. Feminist interpreters examine the story differently, like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Roman Catholic feminist theologian and professor at Harvard Divinity School, who focused on the limitations and potential harm to women in these verses while separating the Lukan writer from the intent of God (“A Feminist Critical Interpretation”; *But She Said*). In addition to these constructive critiques of common readings, feminist scholars also search the verses for female empowerment. Furthermore, some, like many Latter-day Saint speakers and writers, see the story as a lesson in priorities and differences in devotion (Gench 57; Ruffing 20).

Martha choosing to spend her time playing the perfect hostess rather than taking advantage of the Savior’s teaching seems, from a cultural standpoint, to be the “right” or “good” thing to do because she is sacrificing for others, but viewing the story through a feminist theology lens can shed light on the reason why it was Mary who ultimately made the better choice. Mary’s part may be interpreted as “good” because of her devotion to herself and personal needs, compared to Martha’s neglect of herself. In this paper, I intend to apply past and contemporary feminist theologians’ work pertaining to self-sacrifice and care ethics to the story of Mary and Martha in order to present a different way of understanding Mary’s “better part” and explore the resulting implications for women’s lives and traditional gender roles in the culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

A Culture of Marthas

The way members of the Church understand and speak of the story of Mary and Martha reveals much about Latter-day Saint culture and its emphasis on service through sacrifice. In the October 2003 General Conference, Bonnie D. Parkin, the Relief Society General President at the time, stated that Mary and Martha were each serving and expressing their love for Christ in their own individual ways, one by listening and one by preparing a meal (Parkin). The error was in Martha’s judgment of Mary. In her talk, Parkin went on to emphasize the importance of avoiding comparing ourselves to others. Martha, in Parkin’s interpretation, was lacking in charity by complaining about her sister’s supposed laziness and evasion of her duty. Martha failed to put the Savior first

(Parkin). Parkin emphasized from the story that one thing is important above all—to follow the Savior:

Dear sisters, one thing is needful, to follow Him each day. Choose ye therefore Christ the Lord. Choose to feast upon His word. Choose to trust in Him above. Choose to wait upon His love. Choose to give Him all your heart. Choose ye therefore that good part. (Parkin)

Camille Fronk Olson, current chair of the BYU Department of Ancient Scripture, expressed a view similar to that of Parkin: she wrote in the April 2019 *Ensign* that both sisters demonstrated their desire to serve the Savior in their different ways, following the example of the Savior himself who taught that “he who is greatest ministers to others” and spent his life in service (Olson). Olson proposes that Martha’s error was her failure to perceive the different ways in which her sister served Christ, believing herself to be alone in serving. It was not the principle of giving that was awry in this situation, but her attitude. Where Martha served the Lord overtly in the ways that are familiar to us, Mary served by allowing the Savior to serve her “by receiving his word” (Olson).

Brent L. Top’s *Religious Educator* article also sees the importance of placing Christ at the center of our lives to be the moral of the story. Top said Martha’s “elaborate preparations” and “wide array of side dishes” were “nice, but not necessary” and caused her to lose perspective (Top 51). Like Martha, he asked,

Are we ‘stressed out’ and ‘cumbered by many things’ because we are overly concerned about how we appear or what people may think of us? Have we lost sight of why we do what we do? Did Martha feel that she would be less acceptable to the Lord or that others would view her with scorn if she did not prepare a big meal and do everything just right and make everything ‘really nice’? (Top 52)

Do modern-day Church members fall into a similar trap, Top wondered, such as when faced with obstacles a smaller ward budget? “How will we ever be able to do everything for the youth and for the ward on such a small budget? How can we go on a ‘super activity’?” (Top 52). In his interpretation, Martha, like many women of the Church today, was having trouble simplifying.

Many women in the Church see a “kindred spirit” in Martha (Frederickson). For many, she represents the classic Relief Society idol: the pedestaled woman who—like a sister described by Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf who worked all night to complete an elaborate quilt for the next day’s Relief Society lesson, with stitches “perfect,” colors “vibrant,” and design “intricate”—always has perfectly prepared handouts and homemade treats to go along with an ex-

travagant object lesson for presentation on Sunday (Uchtdorf). I once heard Martha compared to a mother so preoccupied with preparing a fancy Sunday brunch the weekend of General Conference that she neglects listening to the morning session, so caught up in her exuberance to go above and beyond for others in the kitchen that she forgets the “best” that is attending to her own spiritual growth and needs. This ideal woman is always thinking of others, constantly making dinners for new mothers, delivering plates of cookies to families in the ward, cleaning sick women’s houses, and organizing tablecloths and floral arrangements for church activities. She never thinks of herself, only of others.

This pedestalization of women in Church culture is fed by comments by church leadership that present women as more selfless than men. For example, in the October 2018 General Conference, President Russell M. Nelson celebrated women’s capacity for mothering others, saying women have “a special gift” for communicating the love of Heavenly Father and the Savior to others and a more natural ability to minister to others than men do (Nelson). “You have the capacity to sense what someone needs—and when he or she needs it...Your nature leads you to think of others *first*,” he said (Nelson).

The way leaders and members of the Church speak about sacrifice, too, can be inadvertently damaging. The culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with its emphasis on service and sacrifice, is other-centric, as well as overcautious when it comes to avoiding selfishness. In the April 2001 General Conference, Carol B. Thomas, then first counselor in the Young Women General Presidency, gave a talk entitled “Sacrifice: An Eternal Investment” (Thomas). She emphasized the importance of making sacrifices in order to live the gospel and reminded the audience of the ultimate sacrifice, that of the Savior Jesus Christ. In addition to her counsel to give more generously to the poor and needy and obey God’s law of sacrifice, Thomas also advocated, “As we teach our families to sacrifice, we should also teach them to deny themselves . . . If we never allow him [our child] to want something, he will never enjoy the pleasure of receiving it” (Thomas). Furthermore, she asked, “Are we encouraging our children to sacrifice by giving their time and resources, such as helping a lonely neighbor or befriending someone who needs it? As they concentrate on the needs of others, their own needs become less important. True joy comes from sacrificing for others” (Thomas).

Many Church leaders, including President Dallin H. Oaks, remind members that living the gospel requires “setting aside personal convenience for unselfish service” (“Unselfish Service”). He warned of the danger of disconnecting from God’s commandments when we fall into selfishness, saying

service will safeguard against this disconnection and that it is imperative to “lose ourselves” in service; he went so far as to say that doing so, in tandem with loving one another, is “the only way to save our eternal life” (“Unselfish Service”). According to C.S. Lewis, quoted by Oaks, “The moment you have a self at all, there is a possibility of putting yourself first”—a choice which, Lewis states, is the “sin of Satan” (“Unselfish Service”). As President Thomas S. Monson famously said in the October 2009 General Conference, “unless we lose ourselves in service to others, there is little purpose to our own lives” (Monson). Where is the line, however, between losing ourselves in wholesome service and abandoning our own well-being and selfhood for the sake of others? When it comes to denying selfish thoughts or desires, the definition of “selfish” can quickly be taken to an extreme. If we are meant to avoid serving only our own needs and wants, we can become unbalanced by denying every one of those needs and wants, some of which are vital.

One example of taking sacrifice to extremes can be seen in the 2014 Mormon Message video titled “You Never Know” (The Church of Jesus Christ). In the eight-minute video, a woman with young children spends her day sacrificing her time and preexisting plans in the service of others. Between taking care of her own family’s various needs and wants, she last minute helps her son create a forgotten science fair project, babysits a friend’s daughter, agrees to meet her sister for lunch, and makes dinner for a couple with a new baby, even though that means missing meeting her cousin who arrives in town that evening on a two-hour layover. Again and again, when a new request for help arises, she insists, “I have time!”, although she clearly does not. At the end of the night, she begins to cry as she looks at her unfinished to-do list. The moral of the video, however, in the October 2003 voice of Gordon B. Hinkley, is that “you never know how much good you do.” Thanks to the mother’s last-minute help, her son won at his school science fair. Her last-minute agreement to babysit her friend’s daughter lifted a burden when the friend received difficult medical news. Her sister greatly needed the protagonist’s advice and companionship that day at lunch. The young couple’s evening was brightened by the meal and their lives made easier. Her day was spent in the service of others, and those others benefited immensely from what she did. Although this message is heartwarming and does demonstrate the importance of serving others, this extreme portrayal of selflessness and self-sacrifice glorifies a lack of boundaries. In her lunch conversation with her sister, the woman suggests that the sister stay at her job despite being unhappy, because “if you left, who else would be able to help them?” (The Church of Jesus Christ). This video is one

product of the social environment stigmatizing turning down opportunities to help others, a stigma which saturates Latter-day Saint culture.

Although these comments and messages are not intended to feed a toxic culture of self-sacrifice or alienate those who do not feel they have the “special gift” of selflessness, this type of rhetoric, although well-intentioned and meant to teach essential, eternal principles, can lead women—and men, as well—to believe their role is to abandon their own needs in order to satisfy the wants of others and even create the impression that others are more important than the self.

In a similar vein, Martha of the New Testament seems to be placing the needs of others above her own. For women who have spent their lives believing selfless sacrifice the path of Christlike discipleship, this seems the correct choice, especially compared to Mary, who seems to be doing nothing. Martha is serving, playing the gracious host. Mary is failing to help. Thus, Martha’s case resonates with many Latter-day Saint women. As Parry said in her BYU devotional address,

Those of us with more of Martha than of Mary in us have long felt that this rebuke is unjust. While we do not doubt the overriding importance of listening to the Lord, does the listening have to be done during dinner preparations? Would it have hurt Mary to have joined us in serving, then we all could have sat down to hear the Lord together? And furthermore, what about the value of our work in the world? If it weren’t for us Marthas cleaning whatever we see and fussing over meals, there would be a lot of dirty, hungry people in this world...Why, oh, why couldn’t the Lord have said, “You’re absolutely right, Martha. What are we thinking of to let you do all this work alone? We’ll all help, and by the way, that centerpiece looks lovely”? (Parry)

The fact that we are able to so frequently identify with Martha makes for a degree of discomfort related to this story. Mary is praised when she deviates from the norm as far as the role expected of her but Martha, in fulfilling what we may consider her traditional role as a woman (a role which is heavily promoted in Latter-day Saint culture), is chastised and blamed (Gench 71). Although Martha seems to conform to our expectations for her as a woman—a homemaker and hostess who takes charge of the more “feminine” tasks of preparing the meal and caring for those in her home—she is told she has chosen incorrectly. For those approaching this tale at face value, there seems no way for women to win.

Martha is relatable also in that she subtly exhibits our negative tendencies to judge others within the Church. In a 2006 *Exponent II* online post, user EmilyCC said that in these verses, “Martha is embodying the culture of the Church” (EmilyCC). Martha preoccupies herself with “the details of religiosity,” as Mary “embodies the spirituality of the Church by stepping back from daily life and listening.” EmilyCC interprets Martha as someone prone to judging others based on their adherence to the cultural guidelines of the Church, someone who believes “that living the culture defines whether or not someone is a ‘good’ member of the Church”—for example, “as a Martha I can become concerned about Lazarus’ testimony when he doesn’t wear a white shirt to church.” Mary, however, went beyond the “external living of the gospel” and allowed herself to be guided by Christ (EmilyCC). From this perspective, Martha represents habits we as church members easily fall into—judging others based on their outward displays of religiosity. Based on this, it is no wonder so many women see themselves in Martha, as Church culture feeds off of dissecting one another’s appearance of good or evil.

Mary and Martha Through a Feminist Lens

Frances Taylor Gench, a professor of the New Testament at Union Theological Seminary, explained that a reason so many women feel strongly about the story of Mary and Martha could be because the setting is familiar to us (Gench 56). She wrote, “whenever women gather to discuss it [this story], at least one usually expresses the following sentiment: ‘I have always hated this story!’” in part because “all of us are familiar with the everyday setting of household living” (56). Martha’s character hits close to home for many reasons, leading to mixed feelings about her story and the Savior’s rebuke.

Many feminists have done their own readings of Luke 10:38-42. Feminist theologians and theorists seeking to decolonize religious stories remind that, as Gillian Moses argues, “it is not always safe to assume that texts are historically or politically objective” (118). They recognize how authoritative readings of the scriptures have an interest in maintaining the status quo, including existing power imbalances, and search for clues suggesting other possibilities beyond the boundaries of status, gender, sexuality, etc. (120). Liberating theologians look for readings with the potential to transform communities.

Critical, liberating readings of this text make sense in light of problematic, misogynist interpretations of Mary and Martha’s interactions with the Savior, including those that pronounce Mary’s “good part” to be that of a traditional, silent wife sitting at the feet of her husband (Gench 59) and those that believe

Luke's goal was to discourage women from ministry and instead encourage their subordination (65). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, posited that the rhetoric of the verses was meant to pit the apostolic women against each other and restrict women's authority and capacity to minister, silencing those who protest and rewarding those who are silent and subordinate. This reading "confirms women's 'suspicion' that in the Lukan account Martha received a 'raw deal'" and validates why women "have always identified more with Martha than with Mary" (*But She Said* 68). These critical scholars ask, "Is Luke oppressor or liberator?" (Carter 264).

Despite these interpretations, however, there is also an abundance of positive, or "apologist," feminist readings of Luke 10:38-42. Warren Carter of the Saint Paul School of Theology claims Luke 10 "celebrates and affirms Martha and Mary's ministry rather than rendering them silent and invisible" (Carter 279). According to Gench and additional thinkers, Mary's good part links back to the first great commandment; her choice to sit at Jesus's feet and listen to his words demonstrates devotion to God (Gench 57). The sisters merely showed their devotion to Him in different ways, focused on the Savior at the center of their individual actions (Ruffing 20).

These are interpretations that empower and vindicate women's religious choices; however, my own reading takes an additional step outside the box. I would like to propose, based on the ideas of feminist theologian thinkers Valerie Saiving, Susan Nelson Dunfee, and Ruth Groenhout, that Mary's good part need not be based on her devotion to anyone other than herself in order to be "good." Perhaps Martha's neglect of herself was really what separated the two sisters all along.

In her landmark 1960 essay "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," Valerie Saiving Goldstein introduced the idea that sin can differ between men and women. She asks the question, "Can we speak meaningfully about feminine experience as something fundamentally different from masculine experience?" (Saiving 101). Men and women have different temptations and thus different sins. She suggests that while religion taught from a male perspective warns against an ultimate sin of pride, women's worst sin may be something entirely different. Saiving asserts that excessive self-sacrifice is the real pitfall for women, along with "underdevelopment or negation of the self" (109). For example, "in infancy the very existence of the child depends upon the mother's ability to transcend her own patterns of thought, feeling, and physical need" (108). This mindset of constant self-denial on behalf of others can become destructive, especially when an undermining emphasis on avoiding pride is added, exacerbating the issue by encouraging women to defend against sin by

sacrificing further. From Saiving's perspective, living in a second-wave feminist society where people are beginning to challenge the status quo, women do not need to guard against pride; they need to guard against shrinking into gender roles and deferring to men, Saiving said, addressing "the deep need of almost any woman, regardless of her personal history and achievements or her belief in her own individual value, to surrender her self-identity and be included in another's 'power of being'" (108). For women, life is more of things that "happen" to her rather than things she is able to do; her existence is a passive one (104). Men do not have to go through the same process of waiting to "become" and reach their full potential as human beings as women do—the emphasis for women, while for men it is "becoming," is on "being" (105). Women are not pressured to take an active role, yet Saiving says this acceptance and passivity is, in truth, part of female sin. By viewing sin and redemption through a male lens, religion is failing women by omitting their experience, oppression, and resulting specific needs.

According to Saiving, redemption comes in the form of standing for oneself—in having a self, individually. Saiving's women are fighting the idea of romantic feminism that deprives them of their agency and thus portrays them as less human than their male counterparts; she says redemption lies in the ability of women "to be women *and* human beings" (108). The solution to a sin of losing oneself is explained in Saiving's prescription suggesting "the moments, hours, and days of self-giving must be balanced by moments, hours, and days of withdrawal into, and enrichment of, her individual selfhood if she is to remain a whole person" (108). The danger is that "a woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God" (108). When drained, she is less capable of serving her fellow men and living up to what God hopes for her to be and do; the solution in this case becomes not more sacrifice but rather the reclamation of oneself.

Susan Nelson Dunfee calls female sin "the sin of hiding." She presents examples of the guilt suffered by women—guilty if she is too assertive, if she is too feminine, if she becomes pregnant, if she never has children, if her marriage fails, if her children become mixed up in drug abuse. As a result, she says, violence against women "is also being etched into the secret lives of women who turn against themselves in self-hatred; who lose themselves in alcohol, drugs, starvation diets—or in the frenetic activity of trying to please everyone else" (316).

As Saiving critiqued rhetoric about the sin of pride, Dunfee critiques traditional ideas about the sin of slothfulness, saying:

[T]he forms of finitude into which one can escape need not be only aspects of one's own physical cravings, but may also be loss of one's self in other finite persons, institutions, or causes. Hence the sin of hiding can take the form of devotion to another—the expending of one's vital energies not in the acceptance of one's own freedom, but in the running away from that freedom by pouring those energies into the life of another (318-19).

Women's sins of neglect and overindulgence can extend to their neglect of themselves and overattention to others. For women as a whole, it is not always "self-love" that should be feared; rather, self-abnegation could pose a larger threat. Dunfee says that "true humanity, as seen in the one true man Jesus Christ, is known through total self-sacrifice. Self-sacrificial love, then, becomes the goal, the supreme human virtue, for all of humanity" (320). But isn't the point of Christ's sacrifice that it was done so no one else need repeat it?

Woman cannot claim her own self and identity if she is trapped in a cycle of self-sacrifice and self-denial, constantly looking to others. Dunfee states that whenever a woman has "poured herself into vicarious living," having "denied her sense of self in total submission to husband/father/boss or in total self-giving to children, job, or family," she can be found guilty of this "sin of hiding" (Dunfee 321-22). As long as the true woman symbol is characterized as wives and mothers pedestalized as "totally self-giving" and long-suffering, women will not be able to fully claim their freedom as complete individuals (322). Even worse, as long as this remains the traditional standard, fully claiming her independence and freedom is considered wrong; "because self-assertion is equated with the sin of pride, the knowledge of her desire to be a self is often experienced by a woman with guilt and anxiety. Hence, the need to be a self is placed in opposition to being the good woman—the good wife and mother—whose total devotion to others is her virtue" (322).

Ruth Groenhout, in her essay "I Can't Say No: Self-Sacrifice and an Ethics of Care," describes how care ethics, in glorifying the obligation we have to care for one another, are problematic in that the theory glorifies the self-sacrificial traits that can lead to women's cooperative subordination. In fact, "not only can they be subordinated, they will participate in their subordination and call it virtue" (153). She, too, expresses familiarity with the female guilt resulting from the social and religious pressures on women to be responsible for others, reminding the reader of the cultural value placed on a self-sacrificial

woman as a “good” woman (153). Thanks to this culture, “the context within which Care theory is heard is one in which women, more than men, hear the call to care as a call to give up legitimate concerns for their own development and subordinate their own talents and abilities in the service of others” (153). Woman’s morality hinges on her ability and willingness to care for others and maintain relationships, even at immense expense to herself. Women are encouraged to give up careers and personal pursuits in the interest of devoting their time and energy to raising children; however, on the other hand, for a man, “giving up one’s job so that one’s wife can more freely pursue her own career has never, in my own experience, been offered as an emulable example of self-sacrifice,” Groenhout points out (157). And strangely, in addition to giving up their intellectual and career development for the sake of others, women’s self-sacrifice also leads them to reject offers of service from others. Groenhout says the problem with care ethics “is not that self-sacrifice can never be advocated....The problem is the differential impact the directive to self-sacrifice has on women as compared to men” (157). Women can quickly become obsessive and feel “compelled to serve the needs of everyone and everything that crosses their path” (158).

A New Understanding of the “Good Part”

Modern-day Latter-day Saint culture shares many characteristics with that of Saiving in the mid-twentieth century, including an emphasis on traditional gender roles as written in *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*. Although not canonized, the proclamation is sometimes weaponized against women trying to break free of their exclusively “nurturing” role. We can easily apply Saiving’s idea to the situation of modern-day women in the Church and to Mary and Martha as well. Dunfee and Groenhout’s ideas also fit smoothly into a reading of Mary and Martha and the plight of women in the Church today.

While for men sin may be most often a case of “commission,” sin can also be one of “omission.” Martha does all she can for those around her, but neglects “the good part”; Mary does something for herself. If we interpret the story of Mary and Martha from the perspective of feminist theologians who subscribe to the idea of a female sin of self-sacrifice, we can infer that perhaps Mary’s good part did not mean putting Christ first, as has been suggested by many LDS scholars and leaders, but putting her own self first. “One thing is needful,” Christ said (Luke 10.42)—could that be prioritizing our own, individual testimonies?

Martha seems to fall into the common gendered trap of self-sacrifice. She “was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone?” (Luke 10.40). Martha evidently believes, as so many of us have been conditioned to believe, that her role is to serve and to sacrifice for others. The Savior called her “careful and troubled about many things” (Luke 10:40). Was she full of cares for the well-being of others? She was surely troubled about the needs of those around her, those of Jesus and his disciples, who at that time were relying on the generosity of others to provide them with food and shelter (Gench 57). In the light of feminist thinkers such as Valerie Saiving, Susan Nelson Dunfee, and Ruth Groenhout, Martha was guilty in literal terms of the sin of too much self-sacrifice.

Mary, on the other hand, put serving to the side in order to listen to Christ. If Martha acts as an example of the sin of self-sacrifice, Mary symbolizes the opposite. Rather than serving others, she acted contrary to the sin of hiding in serving herself before others. Unlike the interpretations of Parkin, Olson, and Top, Mary from a feminist perspective is not choosing the good part because she is putting Christ before herself or by serving Him above all others; the key is that she is very simply serving herself. From this decision, this understanding of the “good part,” we also come to understand the importance of setting personal spirituality above caring for others, at least in some situations. It is better to transgress social and cultural norms and expectations than to fall into sin. Although Martha busied herself taking care of others, she neglected her most important person—herself.

However, it would be imprudent to present Mary and Martha as opposing extremes. Fiorenza explored the duality so often imposed on Mary and Martha, the “good woman/bad woman’ polarization” (*But She Said* 58)—the idea that the sisters represent a “positive figure” and “negative foil,” with Mary’s “good” making Martha’s actions automatically bad (Gench 72). Mary’s listening contrasts Martha’s speaking, Mary’s rest contrasts Martha’s movement, Mary’s receptiveness contrasts Martha’s argument, Mary’s openness contrasts Martha’s purposefulness, and Mary’s passivity contrasts Martha’s agency. Mary’s better choice foils Martha’s rejection. Viewing Mary as the perfect example and Martha as a bad one has negative potential for categorizing all of Mary’s traits as good and all of Martha’s as bad; in fact, Gench specifies that dualistic interpretations should be avoided due to “both a tendency toward allegorizing the sisters and dangerous interpretive polemics” (73). Already, in organized religion, and specifically in the Catholic church, there are problems with polarizing the roles of women. Fiorenza states that women are given two

options; “there are those women who serve God and those women who serve men....Women are either laywomen or nun women, secular or religious, serving their husbands or serving the Lord, their heavenly bridegroom” (*But She Said* 58). Although Martha does exemplify the sin of self-sacrifice, it would be potentially problematic to consider her an exact foil to Mary’s wisdom. The phrase is not “the better part,” but simply “that good part” (Top 48). As Dallin H. Oaks stated in the October 2007 General Conference, Martha’s part also had value, but was not as “needful” as Mary’s: “We have to forego some good things in order to choose others that are better or best because they develop faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and strengthen our families,” or, in this case, strengthen ourselves (“Good, Better, Best”).

This story in particular teaches us that an action may be the right decision even if it benefits “only” oneself, and no one else. Expectations surrounding female sacrifice imply that doing something for oneself is not as valuable unless it also benefits others—a fact that helps explain why it is so difficult for so many people to accept that Mary’s part was the one thing that was needful. How much of the female guilt experienced by women, and specifically women in the Church, is but culturally-induced shame resulting from subversion of unhealthy cultural expectations? Not all mistakes carry moral weight, but our temporal, cultural standards of right, wrong, good, and bad infiltrate our assumptions about sin. This shame we feel when we take time for ourselves, say no to an opportunity to adopt another’s burden when doing so would be harmful to ourselves, or otherwise act in opposition to standards of sacrifice that are purely culturally fabricated does not indicate moral error. Rather, shame for the most part can be regarded as superficial error disguised as moral guilt. Are our motivations for following the status quo based in eternal truths, or cultural habits? As Top wrote, “We need, like Martha, to be stopped dead in our tracks once in awhile and examine *what* we are doing and *why* we are doing it” (Top 50). Members of the Church, and women in particular, often forget there is no rigid dichotomy between selfless and selfish, and feelings of “guilt” are often only shame masquerading as moral failure.

Mary’s “needful” part, when understood through a feminist lens as an act of radical self-love, explains a great deal about the worth and value of an individual. In an other-centric culture, it becomes easy almost to deify the “other,” placing others, along with their needs and wants, above our perception of ourselves. Whereas the sin of pride could be seen as self-deification, the sin of sacrifice is other-deification. Mary’s example reminds us, however, of the great worth each individual has: just as much as her neighbor. For a world where self-esteem is low and rates of people-pleasing high, Christ’s admonition of

Martha, as she other-deifies, could be considered a reminder to stop placing others above the self. Other-love is important, but should not be seen as more important than self-love. As Groenhout said:

[I]f we love the other as much as our self, we must be prepared to value the self as we do the other....My love for my neighbor and my love for myself, based on our equality as loved children of God, ought to be largely identical based on an equal capacity for relationship with God. So if we begin and end with a creation grounding, self-love and other-love must be largely equal. (165-66)

If there is a place for other-love, there must also be space for self-love. It was Mary who found a space.

In truth, we ultimately have no accountability for anyone but our own self. We are directed to study the scriptures, attend church, and pray to develop a deeper relationship with our Heavenly Parents not for others but for the refinement and benefit of ourselves. Logically speaking, self-love should always outweigh other-love in terms of eternal importance; in the words of Groenhout, “I am responsible to God for how I live my life in ways I cannot be responsible (to God) for my neighbor’s life and the choices she makes” (166). As she reminds us, each of us has a duty to preserve oneself so that we may each “continue to fight against evil” and, in addition, be fortified to serve others meaningfully (169). Martha’s tasks were beneficial for the present moment, but Mary prioritized those things of eternal significance. Martha’s neglect of herself, although she remembered the needs of others, did not bring her as close to fulfilling her ultimate obligation to God as did Mary’s attention to her own needs.

In caring for herself through attention to the Savior’s teachings, Mary demonstrated self-love and intentional care for herself, in direct contrast to Martha’s preoccupation with others. In so doing, Mary not only served herself but also demonstrated gratitude to God for her own being and honored Christ’s ultimate sacrifice, which he performed to ensure she need not encumber herself with the salvation of those around her.

Choosing the Good Part

For women, and especially women in the Church, this reading of Mary and Martha’s story is empowering. Christ decreed that Mary’s good part “shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10.42). Mary took the time to practice self-love, to recover her self and identity as an individual outside her role for serving others, as feminist theologians advocate is needful. Mary made a space

for saying “no” to nonessential acts of kindness, changing gender roles, setting boundaries with others, realigning priorities, and revisiting how we speak about sacrifice and service.

A feminist interpretation of Luke 10:38-42 supports a diversion from strict adherence to traditional gender roles. At the time of the event, women were first and foremost charged with household duties, and their education was limited to learning how to care for younger children and perform domestic arts (Frederickson). Martha was, in fact, acting “in step with Jewish law” as she focused on domestically serving those around her (Frederickson). Mary, on the other hand, subverted the law—women of her culture were exempt from studying scripture; the idea of educating women, even in the study of religious texts, was a controversial topic of hot debate. Most women were not educated (Frederickson). Mary’s simple action of listening to Christ’s teachings rather than fulfilling her cultural assignment in the kitchen, and Christ’s subsequent endorsement of her action, provides support for members of the modern Church challenging rigid cultural expectations for gender roles.

Mary also lays groundwork for emphasizing personal boundaries and reaffirming spiritual priorities. Martha, in her sin of self-sacrifice, reminds us of the pitfalls of emphasizing sacrifice above all things and going to extremes with service. BYU Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine J. B. Haws, in his May 2019 devotional address “Wrestling with Comparisons,” warned students to be wary of ways a “sincere desire for selflessness” can be manipulated in certain situations into “codependency or victimization.” He reminded his audience that, should they find themselves or others in such a situation, “we are never called to self-abnegation that harms our mental or physical or emotional well-being. Some of the best things we can do for ourselves or others is to stop abuse of this kind.” Even Christ taught that it is imperative to “cut off hands or eyes that offend us,” and Haws specified that the Joseph Smith Translation extends this prescription to “so-called friends and family and those we have trusted who are leading us down pernicious paths.” Too much sacrifice and selflessness are not only inadvisable but can also lead to and/or exacerbate toxicity and abuse.

In her *Ensign* article about Mary and Martha, Evelyn T. Marshall related that she had multiple times heard teachers list Latter-day Saint women’s priorities “in any number of variations: Church, family, work, self; family, self, Church, work; work, family, Church, self.” Based on our understanding of Latter-day Saint culture, and especially Relief Society culture, it is no wonder the self usually comes in last. Amidst the problems found in Church culture and even comments from Church leaders, however, we are also able to identify

numerous positive examples of healthy and empowering teachings. Marshall made an important point in her analysis of Mary's good part when she stated that, at times, "our 'self' must come first as we refill our own spiritual and emotional reserves. We certainly cannot fill someone else's cup if our own is empty." She quoted Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who said that the dinner provided by Martha that night was not eternal, unlike what Mary gained from her service to herself. "When we get filled with Martha-like anxiety," he said, "it usually stems from failure to establish proper priorities." Mary putting her own needs and progress before all other tasks before her, and especially when we consider the story not from the perspective that she is putting the Savior first but rather placing her own self before all else, reaffirms our need to prioritize our own personal needs, and especially those that are spiritual. Examined in the context of feminist theology where excessive self-sacrifice becomes sinful, boundaries become far more valuable when we make them integral to avoiding sin and becoming Christ-like rather than something that separates us from further serving others.

In order to achieve these ends, changing the culture of the Church little by little to minimize harmful traditions or beliefs that expose us to the potential for harm, a revision in rhetoric is needed, expressly in terms of how we speak of service and sacrifice, and especially in relation to women's roles, both in official communication and casually one to another. As in the examples of prophets and other leaders' word choice about the importance of denying oneself (Thomas) and losing oneself in service (Monson; "Unselfish Service"), as well as generalizations about women as a whole (Nelson), creating once again an angel in the house who is predisposed to selfless sacrifice, words have power to alienate and motivate members to extremes. We need to move away from speaking of selfishness as one extreme rather than a spectrum with some positive possibilities for personal health and growth. We need to encourage conversation, especially in formal church settings such as lessons, talks, and leadership addresses on both micro and macro levels, about healthy priorities, the importance of personal boundaries, and the value of the individual. We are unique in our religion in that we promote personal revelation as a tool to discover what is correct for each individual; we should advocate using that personal line of communication to weigh the importance versus potential damage of certain service-oriented actions in terms of our own personal wellbeing.

We must also remind ourselves and others, including as part of these conversations, that ultimately, it is not our job to save others. That burden has already been suffered by the Savior; we should not push ourselves to take on

others' needs and well-being as though they are our responsibility. We are vulnerable to this assumption in such a culture emphasizing service and sacrifice, and we must guard against such extreme pressures by speaking openly and often about the sacrifice of the Savior. We can serve others, but in the end, it is Christ who will fulfill the final need. Christ is our example, but that does not mean we are called to emulate him perfectly in all things; He was the only one called to sacrifice all for others.

Hearing His Words

When we consider Mary and Martha's story through a lens of feminist theology, the passage becomes an account ripe with possibility for prescriptions to improve the culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as we know it. Despite tendencies to side with Martha due to our environment saturated in toxic messages about women's need to sacrifice for the sake of others, Mary's good part becomes even clearer when we understand ideas about female sin and women's duty to claim their own selfhood. As we progress further as a global church, we can create a safer, more empowering culture by paying closer attention to the nuances of Christ's ministry to women.

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