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N.B. Author thanks an astute and kind reader who pointed out that I conflated Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene in this reflection. "Mea culpa." Pat Marrin (Oct. 10. 2019).

"Mary sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak" (Luke 10:49).

The familiar story of Jesus visiting the house of Martha and Mary is a good example of just how rich the readings are with references to other biblical texts. While the central theme is the tension between the two sisters over meal preparation and listening to Jesus, other details are important and most revealing.

Mary defies convention by sitting with the men as they discuss the scriptures with Jesus. In synagogue, women sat in a separate room and listened to the discussion through a latticed wall. Mary seeks intimacy with Jesus, like the lover in the Song of Songs who first encounters her beloved through the lattice window but wants more, so she pursues him.

Mary sits close to Jesus, at his feet, the place of the beloved disciple. His feet are bare. Sandals were left at the door. When he arrived, someone washed and anointed his feet as a sign of hospitality. The feet of Jesus are revered, like the feet of Moses when he encounters Yahweh at the burning bush. This is holy ground, and Mary knows that "Blessed are the feet on the mountains that bring good news." Jesus is Good News. Mary breathes in the fragrance of his feet as she gazes up at her Lord and listens with all her mind and heart.

Mary of Bethany will again wash and anoint Jesus' feet at the banquet before his death, a gesture Jesus will repeat at the Last Supper when he teaches his disciples about service by washing their feet. When Mary goes to anoint the body of Jesus at the tomb, she encounters the risen Christ and she will reach out to touch his feet, but he is already in transition to glory and going to the Father. Mary is witness to the full mystery, from the cross to the resurrection, and she will be the first to tell the others what she has seen and heard. No wonder the church now calls her the "Apostle to the Apostles."

In this beautiful story, Luke is giving us the entire Gospel and the importance of intimate discipleship all in one. Now we understand why Mary chose the better part. The Word invites us to put aside for the moment all our busy ways of pleasing God with service and good works. Before all else, God wants our full attention, a listening heart filled with love.

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