

Many women resent it when Jesus takes Mary's side in this argument. Martha just wants a little help in the kitchen, but Mary sits with Jesus, and he obviously prefers it that way. You'd think if Martha needed help, both Mary *and* Jesus should drop their little talk and get to work. Although we've come a long way in gender equality, society still makes progress difficult. Some women feel destined to play Martha--preparing the meal, cleaning the house, setting the table. They don't especially like it, but nobody else helps, and they feel the work has to be done. When Jesus says, "O Martha, pipe down," it feels like a slap in the face to women who work hard at home and wish that someone would give them a little respect. If anyone should understand--if any *man* should understand, it should be Jesus. And he blows it. Even professional women in the workplace believe that what they do as active Marthas surpasses a loafing Mary.

However, we shouldn't miss a few other details which cast another light on this story. Even before the conversation about housework, something astonishing has taken place. Martha owns her own home. Jesus enters it alone. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, like a disciple at the master's feet. Jesus overturned the chauvinism of his day. No rabbi entered a woman's home. No woman became a disciple. In this scene, Jesus actually expanded the role of women beyond the kitchen and into discipleship.

If people ever want to argue for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, they would find surprising support from this gospel. At first, to our modern ears, it sounds like Jesus is just another man who never washed a dish he dirtied in his life. But to Luke, Jesus accepted women as disciples, and this story intends to show not how backward, but how revolutionary Jesus was. Now, Pope John Paul II has closed off any discussion on women in the priesthood, though last week he wrote an apology for the way the church has contributed to the oppression of women over the centuries.

Still, people of either gender might disagree with Jesus when he puts down work and builds up meditation. Caught up in the world, leading busy lives, responsible workers, we think we're doing what God wants. It seems crazy to be told that sitting down is better. Well, maybe we should take our lumps. Maybe we get too busy. Maybe we avoid time to just sit and listen to God. If we work so much that we pray too little, we are guilty and deserve the rebuke of Jesus. But to change, we need the cooperation of the whole community. If we want to share time with Christ, we'll all have to share the work--in the community, in the parish, and in the family. Then our work will serve a greater purpose, freeing our time for Christ.