

Listen, Learn, Think, Reflect AND Act, Act, Act

6 Pentecost C

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Gospel: Luke 10:38-42

During his visit to the home of Mary & Martha, Jesus reminds Martha that her concern for her many tasks distracts from the one thing that precedes all else: abiding in the presence of God.

³⁸Now as Jesus & his disciples went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet & listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to Jesus & asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried & distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Overview - Unexpected & Intentional Distraction

As digital tablets & smart phones keep us busy & on the go, today's gospel reminds us of a struggle: when are we to set aside our busy calendars, duties, & to-do lists & simply rest in God's presence, listening to what God has to say to us? This tension mounts in our gospel as Jesus addresses Martha's busyness, worry, & distraction, juxtaposed with Mary's contemplation, focus, & desire to sit at the feet of the great teacher. But is "quietly sitting" even possible in our age of distractions? Perhaps we can find helpful advice in our first reading, as Abraham rests in the heat of the day. In that time of rest, he was ready to receive the three guests who came bearing the news that Sarah would have a son, fulfilling God's promise given years earlier. With the heat keeping him from moving on to other things, the guests had Abraham's undivided attention. These readings remind us how crucial it is to set aside time to spend with God.

Theological Reflection

Today's gospel is sometimes used to vilify Martha (working!) while extolling Mary (contemplating). This distinction is not particularly helpful for several reasons. First, Jesus does not say Martha's work is not necessary; he simply says that Mary's act of faithful contemplation is better. Secondly, many people in North America are far more comfortable with work than they are with the life of interior prayer & introspection.

Contemplation (if we are honest) makes many people nervous or uncomfortable. If anything, it is *this* aspect of our spiritual lives—listening closely, deeply, & carefully—that needs development & practice.

Experiential Idea

To model Mary's example of interior contemplation, try simply offering silence as today's prayers of intercession. No words, no verbose petitions, no drawn-out monologues. Just silence. People may fidget & squirm at first, but they will likely settle into the silence. Prayers do not need to be spoken aloud to be heard by God. Simply begin the prayers with an invitation to pray, then leave two or three minutes in which people can actually do this. This may be something to try over several weeks or a season. You might be surprised at the fruits of silent, deep prayer for those who might not have experienced it before.

Theological Reflection

It is often thought that Martha does not stop doing her tasks simply because she has misplaced priorities. But in Greek, the verb *perispao* indicates that there was "simply too much to do" as an objective fact, rather than Martha being stubborn. Even so, leaving the things that "must be done" in favor of the interior life is a challenge of Christian spirituality. There is always something that "must be done," but the "must" is often a matter of perspective; what do *we* say *must* be done? In the Christian life, the things that *must* be done are simple: gather with the community around word & sacrament, loving God & loving neighbor. As St. Teresa of Avila wrote: "All things are passing; God only is changeless. . . . God alone suffices."

Experiential Idea

The thrust of Jesus' interaction with Mary & Martha is hospitality to guests, a repeated theme in the scriptures. How does your parish treat guests when they arrive? Every parish thinks they do this work well, but reality is often different.

Book

One of the most impressive & enduring texts regarding Christian hospitality is Benedict's *Rule*, a document that has endured for 1,500 years, informing & regulating how Christians might be hospitable. While you may not be ready to become a monk, a study of this document has much to teach about hospitality & how we "welcome all as Christ" (RB, 52). Benedictine sister Joan Chittister has written a brilliant & accessible commentary on the *Rule* for lay spirituality ([*The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*](#), New York: Crossroad, 1992, 2014), & it would provide an excellent parish book study pointing toward this question: What is Christian hospitality?

Denominational Resource

Hospitality must be practiced, not just talked about. One way your community can get involved is through the ELCA's [AAMPARO](#) strategy, an initiative designed to accompany, support, & welcome children from Latin America who are seeking asylum & residency in the United States. You can be as much or as little involved as you want, but this is a great way to "welcome all as Christ" in a tangible, real way, much as both Mary & Martha received the Lord into their home.

Let the Children Come

Abraham & Sarah welcome three mysterious visitors in the heat of the day in today's first reading. In the gospel, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. Both households offer hospitality to their guests in the form of gracious greetings, water for washing, shade & rest, food & drink, & attentive listening. How do we prepare to receive guests in our domestic households? In the household of the church? How are bodies & spirits cared for? How are people fed? Sarah's three measures of flour kneaded into cakes & Mary's attentive listening at Jesus' feet can be images for us today of the ways we are fed in worship through word & meal. Here, week after week, we are fed by Jesus, who is both our host & our guest.

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

In Luke 9:51—19:28, the so-called Travel Narrative, Jesus is often eating meals in houses, & this suggests that Luke's audience heard these stories as instructive for their practice of sharing weekly meals as occasions to experience the risen Christ. Martha, who has her own home, which is not in Bethany (in contrast to John 11:1), seems to be another of Luke's women of means. Recent scholarship into first-century Jewish gender practice has rejected older Christian claims that Christian women, but not Jewish women, could be instructed in the word. Luke may be reminding his Gentile audience that in the church, women can serve. The Greek of verses 40 & 41 is *diakonia* & thus may have had explicit first-century allusion to presiding at the weekly table. Yet here & in Acts, Luke confirms the primary leadership role of men, who are to instruct the women. To sit at the feet of Jesus & receive the word of God is given now to us. Each Sunday we sit at table with Jesus along with Martha & Mary.

Luke emphasizes that Christ came for all: all sectors of society, all peoples, & both sexes. Samaritans, despised by Jews, are welcome in the Kingdom. Jesus has told the 70 that proclaiming his message demands unswerving commitment. The lawyer

has learnt that his love should be for everyone; if it is, he has eternal life. Now Jesus crosses Jewish cultural bounds:

- he is alone with women who are not his relatives;
- a woman serves him; &
- he teaches a woman in her own house.

To sit at someone's feet (v. [39](#)) was to be his disciple. Mary is Jesus' disciple. Martha, while devoted to her home, is "distracted" (v. [40](#)) by *busy-ness*. The "only ... thing" (v. [42](#)) that is really needed is to listen to Jesus' message & proclaim it. This is the task that Mary has chosen; her role is exemplary. Jesus values Martha's role, but Mary's is "better". (The wording of v. [42a](#) varies among early manuscripts. The differences change the interpretation.)

Images in the Readings

Martha images those who serve, **Mary** images those who listen. We are to be both. Their home is our table.

Learning: Augustine said that if our knowledge about the universe conflicted with our biblical interpretation, it was our biblical interpretation that was wrong, for not only was the Bible extremely difficult to interpret, but also God's gracious power was indeed manifest in the created universe.

A Hymn for the Day

Herman Stuempfle, after retiring from the leadership of a Lutheran seminary, put his hand to composing hymns, & "For all the faithful women" (ELW 419) is one of his gems. He wrote this text for the 10th anniversary of the 1st woman ordained in the Lutheran Church in America. Stanza 7 honors both Martha & Mary, as we ask both to hear the word & to be strengthened for service to others.

Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses

Jesus rebukes Martha, & we need to rediscover the revolutionary potential of the concept of ministry suggested in this gospel reading. Service is not a code word for a new power trip, nor a sanctimonious way of justifying the servitude of the enslaved. It is a revolution that overthrows all these models of relationship. It means the self-emptying of alienated male power, even alienated divine power. It is God who begins the *kenosis*, or emptying, of power projected on the throne of heaven. It is God who becomes a servant, pulling out the foundations of all other kings & lords to use the

divine as the model of hierarchy. Only by becoming one with the liberation of all the poor & oppressed do all of us, female & male, black & white, poor & rich, discover our own wholeness, in ourselves & with each other. [Rosemary Radford Ruether, in *Women & the Word: Sermons*, ed. Helen Gray Crotwell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 94, 98.]

Does Jesus value Mary's choice over Martha's? I do not think so. The story of Jesus' visit to Martha's house is related to the questions of church life. Martha's house is a house church where Christians met to worship & learn the word of God. The Book of Acts refers to house churches (2:42, 46; 5:42; 20:20). The traditional interpretation of Luke 10:38-42 presents the narrative as a problem between Martha & Mary, but it is about the two kinds of ministries: diakonia & the word. Martha represents the ministry of diakonia, & Mary represents the ministry of the word. Jesus does not prefer the ministry of the latter over diakonia. Instead, Jesus does not want the diakonia to be at the expense of the ministry of the word. Both ministries are important. The ministry of diakonia should not absorb our energy & time & drive us to neglect God's word. [Niveen Sarras in Working Preacher for July 17, 2022](#)

Thoughts for LIFE (Living In Faith Everyday) from the text: "Serving is important but Learning the Word is more important"

- 1) Ancient hospitality instructed that women were to do all the serving. These were important roles not to be dismissed as guests were to be honored. Hospitality is still important yet we (hopefully) recognize that BEING WITH the guests is more important than leaving them alone in the other room with their refreshments while you go back to the kitchen to finish. How do you balance these in your life? Do you REALLY see & claim the value of being with others... sharing ideas/life understandings together?
- 2) Taking time to be idle enough to listen, learn from others as well as ask questions & then spend time thinking & considering what has been shared is time consuming & takes energy. In a world that places all kinds of pressure on us to "GO, GO, GO & DO, DO, DO", where does this fit in? Can you see how Jesus doesn't denigrate Martha (serving is important) but does lift up Mary's choice? When is enough, enough for hospitality or even getting along? Cleaning up for guests? Tending to social amenities instead of authenticity? Keeping peace and not discussing topics instead of sharing/challenging and discussing ideas so we can all grow up?