

Year C, Proper 16, Mary and Martha

Being Christian is about being in relationship...with God; with each other; with our world.

We need only look as far as the 10 Commandments to see it laid out for us. The first four commandments tell us how to have a good relationship with God. The other six commandments chart the course to having a good relationship with each other. Jesus came along and made it even more plain for us in the two great commandments...Love God...Love each other as you love yourself. The point to this is that, when we are in perfect relationship with God, with others, and with our world, that will mean that the fullness of God's kingdom has arrived – God's kingdom will be perfect on earth as in heaven. But relationships take work as Martha has discovered. Let's look at that more closely together.

We have Martha busy working at various tasks. For some strange reason, people presume Martha is preparing and serving a meal but Luke doesn't write that. Then we have Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, taking in every word. From this, it would seem that Mary has the better relationship with Jesus. She is spending time with him, learning from him. Martha interrupts her work only long enough to complain about Mary doing this instead of helping her and, to her surprise, Jesus sides with Mary. He says to Martha that Mary has chosen the better part.

For centuries, preachers and people have gone on from there to divide church people – women in particular, of course – into the Marthas and the Marys...those who work and those who study scripture and pray. At St. Paul's, South Porcupine, where I grew up, a new priest and his wife arrived to serve our church and it did not take long before I started noticing that the women were grumbling about the

priest's wife – I'll call her Betty. Every time the ladies gathered to work – baking pies, prepping for a tea...whatever...they always invited Betty but Betty never came to help. So, the annual vestry meeting rolled around and Betty stood up in front of everyone and, with the help of a big flip chart, she went through the Mary and Martha story with us and explained that she didn't come out to work with the other ladies of the parish because she was a Mary. As you can probably guess, that did **not** go over very well.

In the Gospel story, Luke is not handing out an easy excuse for folks who might want to avoid getting a sore back or working up a sweat. Indeed, I suspect if we choose the better part with Mary, at some point our prayer will result in action; sitting at Jesus' feet leads to getting up and following when those feet start moving again. We can't all just stay seated in prayer. A whole lot of things would never get done. And Luke is certainly not pooh-poohing the work of hospitality...hospitality and serving others are very important in Luke's Gospel. In fact, this story comes shortly after Jesus has sent out the disciples to proclaim "the kingdom is near" – and Jesus told them to take nothing with them, but rather to rely on the hospitality of others. Besides, dividing ourselves into two groups of people – the Marys and the Marthas – the doers and the pray-ers – is a false dichotomy. There's a little bit of Mary and little bit of Martha in all of us. Of course, this leads many preachers to the conclusion that the moral of the story is that we need to make room for Jesus in our busy lives...add more "Mary" to our "Martha". While that may be good advice, it's not the picture Luke is trying to show us.

First, we need to get it out of our heads that Martha was preparing dinner for her guests. That leads us to take sides – Martha is being wronged by her lazy sister, Mary, and Jesus should have been more sympathetic. Martha is not getting dinner

ready. Luke writes that Martha was distracted by many tasks. Jesus and his disciples have arrived for a visit and Martha is in the next room folding laundry, dusting the shelves, and preparing next week's shopping list. She's getting on with the many tasks of life while Mary and the guests are in the living room chatting. Martha stops only long enough to interrupt the conversation – she wants Mary to join her in doing all of life's tasks while the guests sit chatting in the living room. In response, Jesus tells her that she is worried and distracted by many things. That's twice in just a few short verses that we hear about Martha being distracted – distracted by what and distracted from what? That's the important piece to understanding the story.

Martha is actually not engaged in the hospitality and care of her guests. She's being quite a poor hostess in ignoring them. She is then quite rude by interrupting, to complain, while Jesus is teaching. Jesus is gracious and gentle in his response to her. He points out that she has allowed the worries and cares of the world to set her priorities, to cause her distress and fatigue. He tells her that there is need of only one thing and points out Mary as a good example for Martha to follow. Martha has been distracted from the perfect peace, deeply abiding joy, and certain hope of God's kingdom. Seek first the kingdom. The rest will fall into place.

This story is not about doing verses praying or even balancing the two – although those things are important. This is a story about why those things are important. It's about being in right relationship and when we are in right relationship with God and with each other, we are living into the kingdom of God. In Luke's Gospel we see and hear Jesus proclaiming the kingdom. And then we see Jesus sending out the disciples to proclaim the kingdom. In Luke's Gospel we hear story after story of what life will be like with Jesus in the kingdom of God. In fact, the very next words

Jesus speaks at the end of today's Gospel story are the words of the Lord's Prayer as he teaches his disciples to desire God's kingdom on earth, to turn to God for all of their needs, to focus on the forgiveness and perfection of God's kingdom where everyone will eat together, everyone will be healed, strangers will help strangers. Martha has been distracted from this. She has been distracted from living into the kingdom.

Martha is allowing the world's agenda to set her priorities. When we do that, we forget that everything we do is to bring us closer to the fulfillment of God's purpose. More importantly, we lose the peace, the joy, and the hope of knowing we are moving toward the fulfillment of God's purpose.

Scott O'Dell relates this story in *Psychology Today*:

The Prince of Granada, an heir to the Spanish crown, was arrested and tried by the Royal Audiencia, for fear that he might aspire to the throne.

He was sentenced to solitary confinement for life in Madrid's old and infamous prison, the Place of Skulls, known for the bones of those who once had dwelt there, for its dripping water and assorted vermin.

He was given one book to read, the Bible.

The Prince of Granada read the Bible, apparently hundreds of times, for when he died after thirty-three years in the Place of Skulls, his jailers found that he had covered the walls of his prison, using nails upon the soft, yellow stone, with a series of bizarre notations.

What were these notations that a man, during a lifetime of reading the bible, in hours of loneliness, terror, fear, and boredom, scratched upon the walls of his cell? Were they reflections inspired by the greatest book known to [the Western world]? Were they messages...culled from the hope and wisdom of the Bible?

No, here are some of the notations his jailers found:

The eighth verse of the ninety-seventh psalm is the middle verse of the Bible.

Ezra 7, 21 contains all the letters of the alphabet except the letter J.

...The ninth verse of the eighth chapter of Esther is the longest.

The thirty-fifth verse of the eleventh chapter of St. John is the shortest.

...No word or name of more than six syllables can be found in the Bible. (Story from Augsburg Sermons 3, p.176-7).

The prince got caught up in unimportant tasks focused on details and he missed the point of God's revelation to us in his Word. The prince saw only surface details of letters and words arranged on a page and missed finding God's kingdom.

If we do things while losing sight of God's greater purpose – “the better part” – then some good things may get done, but we will be no different from any other social club that helps others. As Christians, we live into the kingdom – we live the future we know is coming – the sure and certain hope that God will fulfill his promise...there will be a new heaven and a new earth...so we feed the hungry because in God's kingdom, all are fed. We care for the sick because in God's kingdom all are restored.

In the end, the **better** part that Mary displays and Martha had lost sight of... is *the* part of being a disciple. It is always holding front and centre the good news that Jesus brought the kingdom and sharing that with others. It is sitting at the feet of Jesus – as we do together each Sunday – so when his feet start moving we will be prepared to walk in his footsteps, announcing – by our words, our deeds, our very

presence – announcing, “The Kingdom of God is near!” This is why our worship services always conclude by sending the feet of Jesus, our feet, into the world to “love and serve the Lord.” Let us share the better part with the world.