

## **Distractions**

## **16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C**

Martha invites Jesus into her home and begins all the preparatory tasks required of hosting. Her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet. When Martha enlists Jesus to admonish Mary, Jesus says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Jesus is clearly rebuking Martha and affirming Mary, but is he calling us all to spend all day meditating and not doing any tasks? Is he calling us simply to pray the food preparation tasks away? Well yes and no. They each receive from Jesus what they need.

The fact that Luke says, "Martha welcomed (Jesus) into HER home," suggests that either this is a different pair of sisters or that Lazarus is no longer alive since no woman would ever do the welcoming and hosting that Martha does if there were a male in the household - that would always be the man's role.

However, in the next verse, it is Mary who also acts like a man - sitting and listening at the feet of the teacher. And Jesus, shamefully, allows her to sit there! Mary doesn't own a home and probably has no voice or space in her society. She is portrayed as the lesser sister. It's apparent that Martha, who has her own home, is in charge and tells Mary what to do—and often! Mary relies on Martha for food and shelter. Mary has no power in her society; no voice. Then here comes Jesus into Martha's home.

What an empowering statement for Mary to intentionally shun the duties assigned by Martha and sit at the feet of Jesus? Even though Mary doesn't speak with Jesus, she sees him as worthy of her time—and even worth a rebuke from Martha. Mary must be with Jesus!

Martha's complaint to Jesus finally restores some resemblance of normal social order - the woman pleads her case with the senior male - thereby acknowledging Jesus' authority, and properly allowing the man to correct Mary, instead of doing it herself.

Jesus however turns the world upside down! He rejects Martha's complaint, and not only that, states that: Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

Wow. It is difficult for us to grasp how revolutionary is this change in the traditional roles of women. It is one thing to affirm that Mary has chosen the better part. It is quite another to affirm that it won't be taken away from her.

The story is a radical one if one notices how Jesus breaks through the social barriers of his time. Jesus is received as a guest in the home of women. And Jesus teaches a woman. An important part of this story is where Luke places the story, it follows immediately the parable of the Good Samaritan and Jesus injunction "Go and do likewise." Now Jesus affirms and blesses not going and doing but sitting still and listening. Side by side Luke has placed occasions on which Jesus called for active engagement with human need and being still, listening, and learning.

Luke is not making a choice between them, or is he asking the reader to accept one and reject the other, Both the Samaritan and Mary

are examples, and both are matched. The burden lies in discerning when to do the one and when to do the other.

After all, people can always sin and make bad choices - even if those choices are for the "better part" - if such a choice has been forbidden, Remember Adam and Eve. But Jesus affirms Mary and her choice. The "Mary's" in the congregation may feel satisfied with the lesson, but it feels unfinished to me.

Since Jesus is travelling with his disciples, it is likely that the meal is for Jesus and his followers. Has Jesus ever actually prepared a meal for 15 or 20 people? Go ahead. Try doing that without being worried and distracted by many things! Can't be done.

I visit my twin sister Sharon in Ohio twice a year. I can spend about 10 with her before we start getting in each other's hair. We weren't close growing up, we were way too different. She says we are mirror twins. She's right-handed, I'm left-handed. She uses the left side of her brain; I use the right side. She is book smart and I am street smart. But in our early thirties, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. My

husband and I moved in with her so I could take care of her. We lived with her for a year and in that time, we grew very close. she wasn't the easiest patient, but we got her through it. That's just a little background.

When I first started visiting her after she moved out of town, she would have dinner parties. It would be Karen go shopping at get this. Karen would you make the appetizers and start the dinner before I get home. And then when the guests would start arriving, I would sit and start socializing. Well, here she would come in and Karen I need your help. Always telling me what to do. Well, it was her house, her friends, but...I was also a guest. She is Martha. I like the role of Mary, sitting learning about her friends. It made me feel closer to her. Now when I visit, we work together in the kitchen. I could keep going on. But....

The story of Mary and Martha is freighted with family dynamics that are all too familiar. While there are many issues about our human condition to which this story speaks, this time around, for me anyway, competition between sisters, between women, stands out. Why is it that women are against other women, and can be each other's worst

enemies? Well, because our society fosters and depends on the socialization of women toward competition, judgment, and expectation. We should ask why. And we likely know the answer yet is so very hard to admit. Jesus' response to Martha is surprising because it is so unlike his responses to almost all the other women he encounters: the Samaritan women at the well, the bent over woman, the woman who touches the hem of his robe, or the woman who anoints his feet with oil.

His response here to Mary is exactly how Jesus is portrayed elsewhere - he meets and treats women as people, as worthy of respect, and as equal with men.

His response to Martha is also surprising because Martha addresses Jesus in very intimate terms, "Lord, do you not care?" Recall that this is how the disciples in the boat approach Jesus as he sleeps through the storm that is threatening to sink them, Mark 4:38.

His response just does not seem fair. Does he not care? Does he not realize how many things have to be done in a very precise and timely

way in order to get their supper ready? Has he left his God-sized heart and brains at the door?

Instead of chastising Martha, he could have sent Mary back to the kitchen. But that would have been an even worse response for women. Unlike every other encounter he has had with women, that response would have confirmed women in their traditional roles.

But a third alternative was possible. After all, Mary was not the only person in the room who could help with preparing supper.

What if Jesus had said, "You are right Martha. There are many things to worry about to get supper ready." And turning to his disciples, had said, "Pick up your brooms and follow me," and had led his disciples into the kitchen to help get supper ready! And then served. And then cleaned up. And then had everyone sit at his feet and listen to what he was saying. Now THAT would have been a truly radical response.

And I can tell you without any hesitation, that if Jesus had done that, he could have died peacefully in his sleep that night and we would still be worshipping him today as our God and Savior.

Why? Because people who do work that is not valued are not valued as people. If Jesus and his followers had acknowledged and valued the work that Martha was doing, it would have transformed our world.

Imagine going into every kitchen in every home throughout the world today and noticing who is doing the work. Then notice how much their work is valued. Then notice how they are treated outside of the kitchen.

I bet that in almost every case, you would find women are doing the work; their work is not valued; and they are not acknowledged, valued, and respected as equal with men. Now imagine a world where men and women work together in the kitchen and in rearing children; where that work is as valued and respected as all other work. I tell you, much of the exploitation and violence in our world would be gone if we lived in such a world.

Jesus blew it with Martha. But we don't have to.

The danger of this story is its invitation to what is better. To pit one expression of belief, of discipleship, of service, of vocation, against the other. We are exceedingly skilled in such comparison. Yet, when we make these kinds of moves and assumptions, we rarely stop to think about what we then assume about Jesus. To favor Mary is to say Jesus discounts service. Which, if you read the Gospel of Luke, makes no sense at all. And makes Jesus make no sense at all. To favor Martha would be to say service is all that matters. Clearly, both matter, if you read the Gospel of Luke carefully.

In other words, what if this story has nothing to do with who is better and everything to do with who matters? What if this story is not preoccupied with proper acceptance and has everything to do with whom you accept? “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree,” Genesis 18:4.

Mary and Martha cannot be about the better thing that means who is better, who acts better, who can be better. The better thing is the invitation to believe that you are who God sees you to be.

This is not a story about comparison but completion. Not about who is better, but when is better. Not about what is better, but why it is better. Perhaps if we allow for a more nimble and gracious view of the Kingdom of God, we might be able to imagine more of the world as part of it -- even ourselves. And when we imagine ourselves as part of God's Kingdom, we are instantly called to bring about its presence here and now.

It's not in the Bible, except that if we really do desire that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, then we need to ask, "Who is doing the chores in heaven?" And if the answer is, "No one," then the second best answer for here on earth would be, "Everyone." So pick up your brooms and follow Christ!

It is just that simple, It is just that hard.