

Needing and Being Both Mary and Martha

Today we hear the last part of Chapter 10 in Luke's Gospel account. We may ask why did Luke include this passage here? If you will recall, Jesus is on His final journey to Jerusalem, having started in Galilee. There does not seem to be enough information to be a type of transition passage, nothing that 'bridges' the passage before or after this story. Actually, this story stands in contrast to the story before it, the one about the Good Samaritan that we heard last week. Last week's admonition from Jesus of "Go & do likewise" is the opposite of 'sit & listen' that He seems to be telling Martha to do. At first reading, this may be so, but as we have seen in other texts, when we dig a little bit under the surface, then we hear a whole lot more to the passage and where at-first-glance contrasts appear, there is actually quite a continuity.

Most times, there is the comparison made between the actions of Martha and Mary and it is then equated with law and gospel. If this passage gets misused, it could be taken to mean that Jesus is saying that the law is not necessary. However, that would be a mistake because elsewhere we see Jesus tell us that He came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law. When we consider the question of the lawyer from the Good Samaritan text, we see that the lawyer and Martha are at the opposite ends of the law spectrum. The lawyer wanted to know what was the least, the minimum that he had to do to fulfill the law while Martha was concerned with doing too much, she was too focused on the law. Her actions, as well as Jesus' reaction to her, show that she was concerned with what is termed 'legalism' where the focus is only on the law and doing exactly what the law says. Using Martha and her serving dinner as an example, legalism would be worrying too much about the details of getting things 'just right' - making sure that the napkins are exactly in right position, silverware placed correctly, right spacing between everything on table, etc. There is

nothing wrong with hospitality, as the reading from *Genesis 18* shows us, but it is not good when it gets in the way or hinders our relationship with Jesus and hearing the *Gospel*.

We need to remember that these two *Gospel* texts opened with the lawyer asking what must be done to inherit eternal life and Jesus asked him what does the law say about it. The lawyer replied by echoing what Jesus said were the two greatest commandments in *Matthew's Gospel* account to love God with all you heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself. In today's text, we see how these two commandments can sometimes seem at odds with each other. Martha was focusing too much on the second commandment, while Mary was focused on the first commandment. In *Ecclesiastes 3*, we are reminded that there is a time for everything to happen. The quandary for us becomes how to find that right time for everything and where do we find the balance between it all? Perhaps we begin by focusing on one thing.

In the movie "City Slickers," Billy Crystal stars as a middle-aged man with a mid-life crisis. He and two of his friends go to a dude ranch to participate in a cattle drive like in the Old West. One night they were sitting around the campfire and their guide asked them what the secret to life was. When they didn't know, he held up one finger and said that there was one thing that was most important and that everything else did not matter. But each person had to find out what that one thing was for them. Jesus gives us that 'one thing' through the commandments and that is to be focused on God. Mary was doing that; it was the right time and place to be focused on the Lord.

Once we know this 'one thing' that matters above all else, then we can find that balance that is needed. If we are too much like Martha, the church basically becomes a group that is focused on helping others, using the measure of how many people were helped as a guide of how successful they are. Or they become too obsessed with

following all the rules which then becomes the 'idol' of the group. On the other hand, while it is good to study the Scriptures and finding ways to deepen one's relationship with Jesus and God, if the church group is only 'Mary' it could become secluded and not interact with society in any meaningful way.

While Mary and Martha may represent the two dimensions of faith, in order to be fully Christian, both dimensions are need. It does not matter what we name them: learning & doing; divine & human; spiritual & physical; we need both dimensions. Being Christian isn't an either/or religion but rather a both/and religion. It is living within this tension, finding that balance that we have difficulty.

We need to remember that these two dimensions of our faith are not separate, but they are connected. In today's Gospel text, we subtly hear that there is a balance, that there is a time and season for everything. In His reply to Martha, Jesus is telling us that there is a time for service and a time for paying attention to God. The more important aspect of our faith is our relationship with God. Just as the First Commandment tells us that God is to come before anything else, Jesus is saying that this relationship with God through Him is the tipping point, the fulcrum, so to say, that changes life for us. From this relationship comes our desire to follow Jesus and be a 'little Christ," comes our serving others. Not the other way around.

We need to address the needs of our spiritual lives. We need to grow in our faith, grow in our understanding of God's love for the world and for us, grow in our perception of God's presence in the world. We accomplish this by studying Scriptures; by talking with each other about how we understand what God is telling us in the Scriptures; coming to worship; by learning to listen to the Holy Spirit as we are guided on our life's journey, both individually and corporately. From acknowledging, recognizing and seeing God's love and true presence in the world, we go forth into the world, living out the commission that Jesus set for us, sharing the Good News of

Jesus to the whole world; showing mercy to all who are in need, being that good neighbor, letting our imaginations run wild, being guided by the Holy Spirit to the unlimited possibilities of what it means to be a neighbor to someone in need.

At first glance, this Gospel text seems to be placing a choice before us: to either serve others, or to 'listen' to God and Jesus. However, when we look at this text closer and in conjunction with other texts, we see that it is much more than just having a choice. This text reminds us that we are to put God first, above all else. Once we do this, then we will avoid the trappings of legalism and anything else that would become an idol for us, distracting our attention away from God. Having our primary focus on God through Jesus Christ, we will be able to find balance with everything else in our lives; and be the kind of person that God created us to be.

YouTube links

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/yzp5gNZ2anY>

Service: