

Pentecost 9, Proper 11, Year C  
Luke 10:38-42  
July 21, 2019  
St. John's Chula Vista

In the name of Jesus...who offers us the one thing we need. Amen

This week my choice of homily topics was even more difficult than usual...we have Amos...my favorite grumpy Old Testament prophet and his well-known condemnation of those who exploit the poor and vulnerable, but Fr. Tom covered him pretty well last week...or maybe Paul's discourse on Jesus as the firstborn and head of the church...lots to explore there...but in the end, I felt compelled to focus on two extraordinary New Testament ladies...Mary and Martha...the sisters of Lazarus...whom we find definitely out of sorts with each other.

Being the elder of two sisters...only 13 months apart in age, I have to admit that this is a story I can really identify with...which doesn't make it comfortable for me...probably because it hits so close to home! But the very fact it makes me uncomfortable also makes it a story I feel compelled to explore more deeply.

Recall our context...today's narrative picks up the story of mission that began with Jesus being rejected by a Samaritan village, this was followed with the commissioning of the seventy to bring His word to the people and what to do whether they're welcomed or rejected, and just last week, we heard the story of the Good Samaritan, as it illustrates just what it is to be a good neighbor—how to embody the compassion and true hospitality of Jesus as we "go and do likewise".

Today Jesus has been welcomed into a home—the story identifies the house into which he was invited as belonging to Martha—a woman who is consumed by the tasks of being a hostess—of providing hospitality. Martha clearly has issues with her sister Mary, who's chosen to ignore the cultural norms that would have required her to assist her sister in serving the guests, in favor of giving her entire attention to Jesus and His words. Martha attempts to draw Jesus into the disagreement—attempts to "triangulate him" (to use a good pastoral care term) as an ally over against Mary—wow...who of us with siblings hasn't tried this move? Instead, she finds herself receiving a rebuke from the Lord...clearly not the kind of response she'd been expecting! I dare say, she was stunned, as she's not only told her sister isn't wrong in leaving her "to do all the work by myself", but she's also told that her sister "has chosen the better part."

So was Jesus really telling Martha that Mary's inactivity...her lack of help with the chores...was really the "right thing to do"? Was he really telling Martha that her efforts at hospitality for he and the other visitors were really without value? No—I don't think so, as Luke is certainly quite insistent on the importance of hospitality—that it's a gift of love for both God and our neighbor.

I think we need to be very careful about judging the message of this lesson superficially. There's much of importance under the surface here...first of all, though Mary has a passive role, in that she doesn't speak during the exchange, she's being portrayed in the posture

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of a disciple as she listens to Jesus at his feet...just as the male disciples do. From this, we can learn that all are invited to become disciples...all have the possibility of receiving "the better part", just as Mary does.

Secondly, we witness Martha attempting to control and direct the situation—and even to direct Jesus, for that matter—in an effort to secure the resolution to the scenario that she desires. In Jesus' rebuke of her actions, we can learn that there's more to hospitality than preparing the meal and cleaning up afterward...there's making our guests welcome by giving them our attention, by giving them of ourselves, not just of the things we have. The work for its own sake should not supplant our guests as the focus of our actions.

Martha is not rebuked because of the service she's rendering to her guests, nor is Mary praised because she's ignoring the work necessary to offer hospitality; rather the real issue is Martha's anxiety about the outward trappings that's preventing her from being present to the inward grace offered by her guest and His words. Martha mistakenly believes her anxiety will be assuaged if Mary will just come to her aid, but Jesus tells her that true relief will come only when she's willing to enter into true discipleship, as Mary has.

Perhaps it's easier for Martha to busy herself with the chores and stress herself about the details, than it is for her to be quiet and listen...perhaps she's afraid of what she'll hear...perhaps she's never given herself permission to explore what the words might mean for her...or perhaps she's afraid of the changes she may be required to make in her life if she really takes the words to heart.

Here's where this story gets very personal for me. As we all are, I'm a combination of Mary and Martha...and my "Martha" is a pretty strong presence within me. My spiritual director once asked me if I was a "workaholic"...to which I replied..."I don't think I'm a workaholic, but I do think I'm a 'busyaholic'." I am an expert at being Martha...I can keep busy with a zillion tasks—large and small, I can give the Lord a lot of expert advice—instructions He undoubtedly needs, and I can schedule myself so tightly, that I need to add an entry for "spontaneous fun". I feel secure with Martha in control of things—I know what's expected of me, I know the right responses required, and I'm comfortable with how I'm perceived by others.

But what does that do to my "Mary" presence? I confess, she is my great challenge. Emulating her...sitting at the feet of the Lord as a disciple...listening, learning, letting his words touch my heart and soul deeply enough to change the direction of my thinking, my actions, my life...is difficult and, at times, scary for me. Discovering, nurturing, coaxing, affirming, befriending, and, at last, truly owning my Mary is a large part of my on-going journey on the Pilgrim's Way...it's work that has not yet become second nature to me, so it's work that I undertake consciously and purposefully...now with joy, rather than reluctance!

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Of course, we're the homes into which Jesus seeks to enter...sometimes he's rejected, other times he's welcomed in as an honored guest. When we invite him in, He offers His peace, through His words, to us and it's now that this confrontation of our Martha and Mary occurs. Are we so caught up with the busyness of providing hospitality that we focus on ourselves and all we're doing to be able to proclaim our success at hosting a guest such as our Lord? Or—do we, instead, recognize the lasting gift our guest is offering to us? Do we recognize that in accepting the gift of our guest, we're actually allowing ourselves to receive His hospitality, as He offers us the ever-lasting food that will sustain us as His disciples? This story is, for each of us, a window—perhaps a reflection?—into how we welcome God into our lives, our on-going relationship with God, and how we relate to those...such as Amos...whom God sends into our lives as messengers.

As we mature in our faith in Christ, we seek to give more and more room to Mary and her choice. This can be described in many ways, but I would offer that this is how we should engage our call to Christian vocation...whatever the individual nature of that call. It's only when I, at last, can release my anxiety and desire for control that I'm able to sit quietly at the feet of our Lord and be fed. It's here, as I sit and listen, that I first receive His peace and learn of His life-giving words...this is what forms me as a disciple. As I hear His particular words for me—my specific "call"—I'm inspired, emboldened, and empowered for that work. Because He is both guest and host in my "house", I'm intimately involved in a circle of hospitality that provides me with those unique gifts that I can offer my neighbors AND those gifts that will nourish, strengthen, and sustain me in their offering.

Our lives need to be a balance of Mary and Martha, as we're to embody hospitality through our love for God and our love for our neighbors, but its chores must not become our focus, for we must also embody the truth that we cannot long provide for our guests, if we don't allow ourselves to be fed by the supreme Host.

This is true for us as individuals and as the church—we, and our discipleship, are most healthy, vibrant, and contagious when we are deeply enmeshed within God's "circle of hospitality"—giving and being given to in return.

So make your "home" one in which Mary has a place of honor, a place where Jesus readily finds a host who cares more for the guest than for the trappings of hospitality. Treat Martha with respect, but don't allow yourself to be swept up in her anxiety for the superficial things that are of little lasting importance. Take the words you hear at Jesus' feet to heart—make them your own, as you live into your call to vocation and discipleship—and let yourself enjoy the renewal and sustenance He would share with you—for you have chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from you. Amen.