

Proper 11C
Luke 10.38-42
Mary and Martha of Bethany
July 21 2013
St. Augustine's, Freeland

Blessed be the Name of God

The gospel reading this morning gives us two very familiar people, Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, the three being perhaps Jesus' closest friends. Although, as reported in Matthew's gospel, Jesus was heard to say, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" [Mt. 8.20], it was at the Bethany home of these siblings that Jesus came the closest to having a place to rest.

Luke's account, as we have read it, introduces us to Martha and Mary as if we did not know them, so we'll play it that way for the time being. "Jesus entered a certain village"—we know it to be Bethany—where Jesus was welcomed into the home of the sisters. We are told that Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to him, while Martha did not. Here is where the editorial edge of this story starts to show. Of Martha, the narrator says, "Martha was distracted by many tasks." Now a more sympathetic observer might report, "Martha went about the duties of hospitality, providing for their guest." But that is not the narrator's take on things.

Then we come to the essence of the story. Mary's attention to Jesus captures his approval, whereas Martha's attention to other necessities comes to judgment. When Martha complains about being left to the obligations of hospitality without aid from her sister, Jesus speaks words that have been forever remembered about Martha. "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."

This narrative begins our acquaintanceship and eventual familiarity with these two women and later on with their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. More than once, they provided shelter for Jesus.

In the persons of each of these sisters, Mary and Martha, we see expressed one of the continuing traditions in the practice of the Christian life. Each of these women was close to Jesus, together they welcomed him and tended to him, each in her own way. Mary may have chosen what Jesus counted as the "better part," but she did not choose the "only" part.

Mary, the contemplative and attentive one; Martha, the attentive and active one. Perhaps Mary's lineage is the lineage of the monastic life, the life of ordered prayer and contemplation. Here we might place Clare of Assisi and Julian of Norwich, perhaps Francis and Bernard of Clairvaux. Among Martha's children we might count the reformers of the

16th century or Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa. But this sort of sorting, inevitably leads to complications and imprecision.

For example, the life of Benedictines is built around the obligation to pray and work, “ora et labora.” Whereas men and women living the Benedictine life are obliged to be people of regular prayer, they are also obliged to be at work, sometimes in the field or study or kitchen, and sometimes in the streets. That is, the way this life gets lived out, sometimes it’s Mary and sometimes it’s Martha.

You are doubtless familiar with the Myers-Briggs personality classification scheme, a method of analyzing personality traits such that one knows oneself all the better, and others as well. ISFJ—that is the Myers-Briggs monogram on my towels at home—ISFJ. All the evidence confirms that I am a devout introvert and a recovering type A personality.

Now I mention this scheme because as I was thinking about Mary and Martha, I thought of another personality measure, another spectrum, if you will, by which any of us might be measured. This is the Mary/Martha index. I’m sure this analytical tool cannot produce as consistent results as the Myers-Briggs, but it seems like it might be fun to explore sometime.

By my own confession, I am a very strong Martha, though I do possess modest and occasional Mary traits. I know some of you here this morning are possessed of a similar constitution. We Marthas are often

more attentive to things and tasks than we are to people, as in our gospel story this morning. We would argue that for the Marys to have the liberty to be attentive, they need us Marthas to get stuff done!

We have in our parish two accomplished iconographers. These gifted people create images intended to draw the attention of Mary out of each of us. Their works invite contemplation, deep entrance into their color and the emotion they contain. Created with restraint and extraordinary care, the icons bring the saints to us, and Our Lord as well. Like Jesus himself in Bethany, the icons bring us a presence to which we can only respond in attention and contemplation. It seems to me that in this way and by this means, we get some taste of what Mary was about, sitting at the feet of Jesus.

For some of us, this sort of attention and focus come readily. This focus and attention are native to some of us, easy and forthcoming. For others, not so much. And for some of us, perhaps most, we are somewhere on a spectrum, somewhere between Martha and Mary.

One of the joys in my life in this parish is my responsibility as the Chaplain to the Altar Guild, truly a Martha among many Marthas! What could be better! I'll tell you why.

I have been a priest of 45 years, many of those years spent as a seminary professor of liturgy. It has often been my happy task to share in the care of the worship place on the seminary campus, both in Vancouver BC where I began my teaching life in 1975 and in Austin TX

where I taught for 23 years. Along with others, I tended to the place where the community gathered for regular prayer, community singing and quiet times of retirement and contemplation. The Chapel of the Epiphany in Vancouver and Christ Chapel in Austin, these were very familiar places to me and to those others with whom I shared responsibilities. Some of my fondest memories of those places are of the times I was there alone, seeing to things.

In fact, at the Vancouver School of Theology, during the years I taught there, when times came at gatherings for students to tease and sometimes mimic the faculty, I was typically portrayed by a student silently counting the squares in the chapel floor and then setting the chairs right. [I realized that as much as I imagined I was doing this sort of thing alone, the full glass windows on either side of the Chapel let passers by observe what some took as an obsession of mine.]

To the extent that you all come here each Sunday morning to enter into the example of Mary, choosing the “better part,” there are a number of people whose responsibilities as Martha make this “better part” possible. And primary amongst these agents of help and mercy are the members of the Altar Guild. I know for a fact that while we are all engaged in our prayer and song and listening, they are alert to whatever might come along that would need their action, a missing something or other, a spilled something or other. I know that every time Nigel goes behind that wall, there is a quiet “Oh dear!” or something stronger that

rushes through the minds of the Guild members on duty for the day.

Much as the liturgy expects us to be Marys, without the Marthas, we'd be lost.

Now what to make of Jesus' admonition to Martha about being "worried and distracted by many things..." as if that were a bad thing? I want very much to react to that, and to react rather badly. As a fairly devout Martha person, standing in solidarity with other Martha people, I want to ask some difficult, snide and doubtless inappropriate questions. For example: Who does Jesus' laundry? Who packs his lunch for him for his meanderings? Who sees to things that go unreported in the stories about him? Who makes arrangements for the boats he depends on? Who repairs his sandals and gives him a haircut? Surely, if Mary chose the better part, she's not going to be of much help with all this!

Well, enough of that carping, though it does make me feel better! My musings notwithstanding, all this needs to be set on a larger stage.

For both Mary and Martha, there are other questions, other matters that matter, that matter deeply. However we are built, whichever part we have chosen, we still have the larger world to live in and to care for. We have the hungry and the sick. We have the naked and those in prison. We have the work our Jewish friends call *tikkun olam*, healing the world. We have neighborhoods where Trayvon Martin walks of an evening and George Zimmerman "defends" himself with a handgun, standing his ground. We have too many places where war

finds welcome and even more places where the poor die hungry and unnoticed. Racism is alive and well in our world, alongside greed and exploitation. Yes, there is much for us to pray about and much to do. The Benedictines have it right, *ora et labora*.

Augustine of Hippo, that is, the other Augustine, said it right. “Pray as if everything depends on God; work as if everything depends on you.” That seems to set a proper course for all of us, Marthas and Marys alike, a proper course, indeed.

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