

Pentecost 6C 17 July 2022
Luke 10:38-42
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus says to Martha, *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.”* Let's pray:

My first question seems to be pointless but I'll ask it anyway: Who does Jesus say has done the more noble thing? Mary, right? Maybe, maybe not. Let's do a little digging.

We're given more detail about this event in John's Gospel. Martha goes out to meet Jesus, while Mary sits in the house (John 11:20), and at dinner Martha serves and Mary anoints Jesus' feet (John 12:1-3). Martha extends hospitality to Jesus and is waiting for the blessing which is normally accorded to those who receive Jesus or his disciples. It doesn't come and Martha lodges a reasonable complaint. To add to Martha's exasperation, Jesus goes on to say that Mary has chosen the better part.

We understand Jesus' point to be that the word of God and not food is the one thing needful; an echo of [Deuteronomy 8:3], 'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.' But there is more going on here than a simple reading of the text suggests.

There are many times in my life when I've made a decision and known instinctively that it was absolutely the right one to make. Definitely the right choice without a shadow of doubt. If I were offered a rerun, I'd make the same decision and do so with complete confidence and my conscience at peace. However, there've also been times when I've made what I thought was the right decision, but with the benefit of hindsight, can now see there was a better choice I could've made. Given another chance, I'd do things completely differently.

It's often the case that we base the decisions we make, and their subsequent approval or rejection, on our own sense of goodness, worthiness, acceptableness, faithfulness, and lovable-ness. That's what most of history has done with Mary and Martha. Mary made the better choice, Jesus says, and we quickly conclude that we should be like Mary, not Martha. We should sit and listen rather than be active and busy. Mary is equated with the contemplative life and Martha with the active life and much of Christian history has promoted the contemplative life as the better. That's one reading of this text but is it the only reading, the definitive reading? Is Mary necessarily better, more holy, more loved, more acceptable to Jesus?

We must be careful not to cartoon this scene: Martha up to her armpits in soapsuds, Mary sitting contemplatively on a stool, and Jesus giving scriptural support for letting dishes pile up in the wash tub. If we treat Martha too harshly, she might withdraw from serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too highly, she may sit there forever. To capture the spirit of [Ecclesiastes 3]: There's a time to go and do; there's a time to sit and listen.

One of the problems with translating the scriptures into English is that we can only make our best estimation of an ancient and unfamiliar culture, context, and the theological points being made. One translator may differ to another on the original intention or thrust of a text, and come to a different conclusion, hence translation of the meaning. The more direct translation of "there is need of only **one** thing" is: "there is need of **few** [ὀλίγων] things." This makes the scope of the story much wider than a simplistic, Mary good, Martha bad interpretation.

If Jesus is saying that Mary, to the exclusion of Martha, is the way we're to be then the next time Kathy asks me to help with something around the house, I'll just say, "No thanks, beautiful, you go ahead. I'm going to do the better part and sit here with Jesus." I don't think that's what Jesus is saying and I know that I'd be a poor husband if I shirked my responsibility. Jesus is making an observation, not a judgement.

Essentially, this text is as much about us as it is about Mary and Martha. It helps us to think about the choices we make. It doesn't mean we should all be copy-cats of Mary. If Jesus wanted us to do that he would've given us another list of Commandments or Beatitudes; ten easy steps to choosing the better part, but he didn't.

Jesus is saying that the decisions we make, matter. We're always making choices. Sometimes we choose unconsciously, sometimes quickly and easily, other times with great deliberation and struggle. Some choices are insignificant and bear little or no consequence. They're soon forgotten. Other choices have great meaning and significance and the consequences are long lasting. They can shape who we are. They can establish in us patterns and habits of how we see and act, the words we speak, and the ways we relate to each other. Some decisions can set a direction for our life.

In this particular context Mary made the better choice but it was a choice for that time, that place, and in that circumstance. Change the setting and Martha's choice might have been the better part. We can see that in Jesus' own life. Sometimes Jesus went off by himself to be alone, silent, still, to pray, to sit and listen, to be present to his Father. At those times he was like Mary. Other times Jesus was active, on the move, in the midst of people, and busy teaching, healing, feeding multitudes. On those days he was more like Martha.

While we might distinguish between Mary and Martha there's a common thread that runs through this account: presence. Mary and Martha show two ways of being present. Both ways are necessary, faithful, and holy. There's not simply one decision to be made forever and always. Life presents a constant flow of situations in which we must always be discerning what's needed at a particular time, place, and circumstance. The question for us is: How do we be present to the divine presence that's already and always before us? Some days Mary will be our guide and other days Martha will be our guide. Either way we must always make choices.

Some days that choice may mean sitting quietly and listening to the heartbeat of God within us, reading and studying, watching a sunset, or praying for the world. Other days it might mean speaking words of hope and encouragement, offering actions of compassion and hospitality, seeking forgiveness and making amends, or sloshing around in mud with our children.

What's the one thing needed right now, in this moment? Not forever or what you think will fix all your problems and let you live happily ever after. Just for now. What's the one thing needed that'll keep you awake, aware, open, receptive, and present to Christ? Whatever that is for you at this moment, that is the better part, but, there'll be other choices to make after that, and others after that. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. For example, if we were to ask Jesus whether we should follow the example we heard last week in the parable of the good Samaritan or the one we've heard today about Mary, his answer would probably be, Yes.

We must always choose life, love, relationships, faith, salvation, yet, our starting point must always be being present to Jesus and the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and to discern how we may best serve God's will and mission in the world. May God, give you grace, peace, mercy, and wisdom as you discern his will for your life. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.