

Sermon for July 23, 2023—“The Better Part”

Sixteenth Sunday in OT, Year C—Texts: Colossians 3 1-4, 12-17; Luke 10:38-42

When Jesus entered the village, he went to Mary and Martha’s place. Where else would he go? Once there, Jesus is waiting for the meal to be prepared something I’m sure we’ve all done in other people’s houses. Presumably, Martha’s not just cooking for Jesus, but for his disciples and maybe even for her brother Lazarus as well. So that’s—what? Fifteen, sixteen people?

Anyone who’s ever cooked for this many people or more knows that this is a pretty big job. Martha could probably use a little help, but where’s Mary? Well, Mary’s sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to what he has to say. Martha’s annoyed that her sister is not helping cook the meal. And rightly so.

Martha was doing **exactly** what she was expected to do, the right and proper thing, the socially acceptable thing. As for Mary, well, her actions were not only unusual, but socially unacceptable. According to every custom of the day, she should’ve been helping Martha. The hospitality code and other customs of that time allowed for nothing else.

So, with this in mind, Martha comes to Jesus and tells him to set her sister straight, and send her into the kitchen. And then we get this famous line from Jesus: **“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.”**

These two sisters represent two paths of Christian devotion, and they’ve become icons and symbols of hard work, effort, and busy-ness on the one hand; reflection, attentiveness, and faithfulness on the other. They’ve become two of the ways we categorize and label each other in the church. There’s Mary, the woman of study and prayer, the quiet contemplative one, who wants nothing more than to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen. Then there’s Martha, the woman of action, the servant who sees the need, and is energized to meet the need. We know Mary and Martha. We identify with them. We **need** Mary and Martha. Both of them.

So—what do we make of Jesus’ response to Martha? Is it just me—or does Jesus sound a bit patronizing? I can almost imagine him patting her on the head and saying, “There, there now Martha, don’t you fret. Someday when you get what the spiritual life is **really** about you won’t be in such a dither. Don’t worry. Mary and I will pray for you.”

So what are to make of Mary and Martha? What is “the better part” that Mary chose? What is Jesus inviting us to choose? As I said, we know Mary and Martha. We identify with them. We see ourselves in them and that’s where things can become a bit confusing. We can see so much of ourselves in Mary and Martha that we can lose sight of Mary and Martha. We then shift the question from, “What is Jesus saying to these particular women in this particular encounter” to “What is Jesus saying, in general, to me about me?” It’s really easy to do. It’s actually what we’re wired to do when reading Scripture; that is we read certain things into the story.

In today’s reading, folks who identified with Mary read this story one way. Folks who identified with Martha read the story another way. We read this as a story about two ways of being a Christian. We read it as being a contest. We see it as a contest between a Christian life of service versus a Christian life of prayer, with Jesus declaring the life of prayer as the winner. Is that what this is about?

Is the story of Mary and Martha about “winning?” Is it about which way is the better/best way of being a Christian? I think not. I think that if we read it that way we’ve fallen into a trap—the trap of a false dichotomy. We’ve read this story as an “either/or” thing. Either Mary **OR** Martha. One way being better than the other. Be like this—not like this. But while it’s oh-so-tempting to do that, it’s wrong, and for one important reason. Jesus is for both Mary **and** Martha, and by turning it into a contest, we’ve turned a word of mercy, grace, and abiding love into a word of judgment, condemnation, and rejection. We’re good at that—yeah we are! We’re good at turning God into an unforgiving, unrelenting judge. In fact, we’re **really** good at it.

Here’s where I ask that you please remember Christmas. Wait—Christmas? Did you say Christmas? It’s July! Yep, I said Christmas. I mention it because it’s a time when we remember that Jesus is God in human flesh. Emmanuel—God with us. Remember? It’s God embracing the human condition. The human condition, life with all its limits, frustrations, and struggles; where things are sometimes taken out of our hands by forces beyond our control. Life where somebody has to cook dinner, and somebody has to do the dishes because they won’t do them themselves.

So Jesus isn’t choosing Mary **OVER** Martha. He isn’t affirming a life of prayer over a life of service. Nope—not at all. There’s more to this story. Isn’t there always? Again, this isn’t the story of Mary **OR** Martha, it’s the story of Mary **AND** Martha. There’s more to the story of Mary and Martha than meets the eye. We see this as a story of human doings. Mary does this. Martha does that. Jesus likes what Mary does more than what Martha does. End of story.

But listen again to what 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 which will not be taken away from her.**” Jesus isn’t addressing **WHAT** Martha’s doing, he’s concerned about **HOW** she’s doing. He’s concerned about her “being.” She’s “worried and distracted.” Three times in these five verses Martha’s described as being stressed out and anxious, and the original Greek actually uses three different ways of doing so.

And you have to wonder why’s she so stressed out and anxious? Is it because Jesus has suddenly appeared on her doorstep, and now has to play the hostess with the most-est? Is it because she knows how much food’s in the cupboard, how much is left in the food budget, and how much it’s going to take to feed this crowd? Is it because there’s a lot of work in putting a meal on the table, one she can be proud of, one that’s fit for her Lord? Could be—pick one. Pick the one that’d make **you** the most stressed out and anxious because Jesus’ concern is simply that Martha **not** be stressed out and anxious.

Jesus is inviting Martha to choose to see her work in a different way, to focus on the one thing that matters, to choose the better part that will not be taken away. Something tells me that Jesus didn’t just show up and expect the sisters to just drop everything else to prepare an elaborate meal for him and his buddies. What do you think? I’d think that while Jesus would’ve loved a good home-cooked meal, his visit was more about his love for the women than anything else.

So, here’s the challenge: How can we serve and not lose our souls? What I mean is: How can we serve and not lose sight of **who** we’re serving and **why**? What do I mean? Well, just this: We do things in the church—lots of things, relatively speaking—and there are lots of things we’d like to do for lots of reasons.

We have activities, events, programs, and we get so stressed out, so anxious, so darn distracted, so caught up in the details OR we get caught up in doing things for all the wrong reasons—like doing them because we’ve always done them, or to try and attract more people—that we lose sight of why we do them, as part of our mission and ministry as a church of Jesus Christ. And what is that exactly? Well, we’ve talked about it before. It’s loving God and loving our neighbor.

Brother Lawrence, a French Carmelite lay monk, wrote a classic Christian text entitled *Practicing the Presence of God*. There he illustrates what choosing “the better part” looks like. He wrote:

“Men invent means and methods of coming at God’s love. They learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God’s presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of him?”

For Brother Lawrence, “...common business,” no matter how mundane or routine, could be a medium of God’s love. The sacredness or worldly status of a task mattered less than motivation behind it. He felt that having a proper heart—a proper attitude—gave every detail of his life infinite value.

Brothers and sisters, here’s the thing: The love of God is the better part, that which will not be taken away from us. When we choose to see life’s surprises, life’s inconveniences, and discomforts as opportunities to experience and express God’s love, we choose the better part. We must overcome the distractions that lure us to focus on lesser things, distractions that lead to being stressed-out and anxious, and instead focus on the one thing, the love of God, that is offered every moment of every day; the love of God that will never be taken away—that **cannot** be taken away.

So—I ask: What are we doing? How are we living? Jesus cares. Jesus cares if you’re stressed-out and anxious. Jesus cares indeed, and in the story of Mary and Martha he invites us to look at our lives in a new way. How might our lives be better if we did everything in the right frame of mind? What if instead of allowing worries and distractions to make us miserable, instead of allowing being a part of the ministry of the church a burden or a chore, we remembered that it’s not about us, but is being done for God’s people? What if we did so, knowing that that God is present, and that what we do is for his glory alone? What if we focused on the one thing that will never be taken away, God’s love for us? A love that is always there for us.

With God, there’s peace.

With God, there’s hope.

With God, there’s a way.

Jesus speaks to us, especially now: **“Westwood First, Westwood First, don’t be worried and distracted by many things, don’t be stressed out and anxious. Remember I love you. Choose the better part.”**

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.