

Homily for July 20, 20225

Genesis 18:1-10, Psalm 15, Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:38-42

Martha and Mary – a binary tension

Let me ask you: Are you a “Martha” or a “Mary”? That is sometimes how this story is framed. Are you always active, looking for ways to be helpful and caring like Martha? Remember the example of the Good Samaritan last week. Jesus told the young lawyer who listened to the story to “go and do likewise”? To care for others.

Or are you, like Mary, devoting time to build a personal relationship with Jesus through spending time listening for his voice, reading his word and in prayer?

Asking ourselves where we fit in this binary is not a bad question, but if we asked Jesus which example we are to follow, the active Martha - or the contemplative Mary, he’d probably say “Yes.”

So as I prepared this homily, my question was: what can we learn from this passage to help us today on our quest to become better followers of Jesus. This is how I chose to frame the story.

Martha welcomes Jesus into her home and sets about preparing a good meal for him. Not just a plate of cheese and crackers for such an important guest but the best she can produce. Martha is anxious, perhaps overwhelmed. It’s short notice, what food is on hand? The Greek word used to describe Martha’s anxiety is *merimna* – the same word was used to describe the state of the disciples when they were out on the Sea of Galilee and a massive storm blew up. They thought they were going to drown! They had major level anxiety! That’s what Martha is feeling!

Martha is also so distracted by everything she’s planning and doing that she’s not listening to Jesus. She made the choice to prepare this big meal and now she’s too busy, she can’t afford the time to stop and listen. Her sister, Mary, on the other hand, seizes this opportunity to be with Jesus, she sits at his feet,

just listening. How many more opportunities might they have? She is totally focused on him, absorbing his every word. She is being a disciple.

Mary's behavior is culturally scandalous! She is bold enough to go and sit among the men at the feet of Jesus, like a rabbinic scholar. This is not done. Mary is just being her simple, brave self. She wants only to learn, to know Jesus better.

Now, Martha, instead of quietly telling Mary to get her butt back into the kitchen where she belongs and help her, interrupts Jesus. I wonder if her complaining is really a case of "look at me, working all by myself." Was she really expecting Jesus to send Mary to her or, rather, is she looking to Jesus to recognize her hard work? There's a lot of ME, ME, MYSELF in her complaint. It seems more like she is asking Jesus to affirm the value of her effort – look at what I am doing for you.

So, while Mary is wanting to be close to Jesus to be in relationship with him. Martha is perhaps hiding behind her work. Her identity, her sense of self-worth is bound up in what she does, and in that way, she feels valued. There is another story of Martha in John's Gospel where she is again sharing her hospitality. This is her role. AND perhaps she's insecure or feels vulnerable just approaching Jesus with nothing to commend herself?

Jesus gently rebukes Martha: Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.

Jesus is not rebuking Martha for wanting to prepare a meal for them. Hospitality is a sacred gift. It is her gift, for sure, but Jesus is affirming Mary's choice as the better one: choosing closeness to Jesus, seeking spiritual growth has the more lasting value. Martha's priorities are wrong on that day.

For Mary, her identity is rooted in her relationship with Jesus – the well-known hymn: Just as I am, without one plea, I come to Thee. That's Mary.

But for Martha, her identity is rooted in her accomplishments, and I think that her sense of self-worth depends on this which is why Jesus challenges her choice.

Many of us are Marthas. We define ourselves by what we do, how much we accomplish, how helpful we are. We are good and faithful people, but we are distracted by many things and, if we are not careful, we can begin **to serve, to earn love** rather than **serve, because we are loved**. Perhaps **we** lack the confidence of Mary and feel unworthy when we approach Jesus, so we hide behind our accomplishments too.

As I read this story about Martha and Mary: this is not a binary but more a tension. The story is **not** about choosing between good works or contemplation. It's about **not** valuing ourselves by what we accomplish but rather by who we are in relationship with Jesus.

The invitation in this story still continues for us today: to become more like Mary: rooted in being **with** Jesus more than **doing** for him.

Two weeks ago, I was visiting an old friend and he said: I hear you are very active in your church. I said "yes" and he said: That's good, it's good to keep busy in retirement. True but... I wasn't quick enough to process this at the time. But as I thought about it later, I thought: Do I come to church to be busy, does this make me feel important? I hope not! I am here to learn to how to walk more closely with Jesus and allow him to direct my life. But I know I lose sight of this a lot. Not sure how if I could have shared this with my friend!

So, if you are a Martha, can you change? Can you learn to let Mary lead in your life? Be centered on Jesus as Mary was, then act like Martha?

There are many examples of people who have achieved this transformation.

I have been reading a book by David Brooks (The Road to Character) and he writes about the life of Dorothy Day – I am sure many of you know about her. She was an amazing person. She was a journalist and a passionate activist. In the 1920s, she marched for workers' rights, women's suffrage and peace. She

lived an intense life and yet, apparently, she struggled with loneliness and wanting to believe that her life counted for something.

After giving birth to her daughter, something changed. She wrote:

“I felt a sense of responsibility for this child’s soul and my own.”

She started attending mass and converted to Catholicism. Her conversion didn’t diminish her activism, it deepened it. With Peter Maurin, she founded the Catholic Workers Movement, opening soup kitchens, helping the homeless, publishing a newspaper for the marginalized and living among them.

But in the midst of all her hard work, she discovered that activism without prayer burns out. I have copied several of her quotes and want to remember them. She said: “Service without stillness becomes self-righteous.

Another time, she said: You cannot sustain compassion if you do not also draw from the well of God’s presence.”

I think the most famous quote attributed to her is this: “The older I get, the more I see prayer as the only answer.”

She was a Martha in her work, but she had become a Mary in her soul.

She never stopped being active until her death in 1980.

So, what does it look like to let Mary lead Martha in your life? As I thought about this, I was remembering Brother Lawrence, the Carmelite monk, who wrote a little book called “Practicing the Presence of God.

I think it begins with listening. At the start of your day, before you prepare your “To Do” list, take time to be silent before God and then ask for His leading as you prioritize your tasks.

Perhaps during your day, you can take 5 minutes now and again, before you start a new task, to be silent and allow Jesus to recenter you.

Perhaps you can consciously invite God to be with you in the work as Brother Lawrence did.

What about all those distractions? Practice not being distracted – especially when praying or at worship. Be alert to this. It's hard. But so are most things that are worth doing. Don't know who said this but I suspect it was my father!

I think that we know the answer for ourselves. It's following our plan consistently, that is the challenge. But it's worth striving for!

Let us pray:

Lord, teach us to be still, to listen for your voice, and to serve from a heart that has first connected closely to You. May we learn to serve you not only through our doing but through our being.

Thank you

Amen