

As we look at today's gospel reading, I am going to start right out by saying that I think far too often Martha has gotten a bad rap. However, I have not always felt this way. So, let me explain.

I have three siblings. I have always been the studious one, while my siblings have focused on other things. I have always taken great pride in my studious work, and I frequently judged my siblings for not being as serious about their educational experience. So, when I look at today's gospel reading from the perspective of my life, I realize that for many years I **justified** my actions by seeing myself as a Mary, thinking I was *better* because I was really choosing to do the "right" thing, the better thing, the main thing, choosing what I believed was more or most important.

For years, my understanding of this gospel story went something like this: Martha is doing her best to show hospitality to Jesus and the rest of her guests, busily working away on the food, while Mary does something very **unusual**. Normally in the ancient world, **all** the adult women would have shared in the responsibility of preparing a meal, but Mary does not do so. Instead, she intentionally **chooses** to quietly sit at Jesus' feet, a posture normally reserved only

for men in that ancient culture. Like a student or disciple, she intently listens to what Jesus is saying.

Well, Martha gets upset about this, and worry, anxiety and frustration bubble up within her. Tired of doing all the work while Mary sits, Martha lets her feelings be known. Instead of going directly to Mary, she goes to Jesus and reprimands **him**, trying to get **him** to tell Mary to get to work. Jesus then gently scolds Martha and **seems** to take Mary's side in the dispute when he says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen it; Mary has chosen the **better** part." And there you go – for years, that understanding of this story provided **my** justification for the way I focused on my studies!

However, I have gradually learned that, if I am going to **really** understand what this story is saying to us, I need to grapple with Jesus' response. Just why does Jesus praise Mary and defend her against Martha? Is he criticizing busy work, "busy work Christianity"? In other words, is he saying to Martha, "Stop being so busily religious and start being more spiritual, like Mary?"

I think not. Martha was **not** doing something trivial. Showing hospitality and cooking the meal were of utmost importance. After all,

being hospitable means that somebody **must** cook the meal and set the table. And, when I think of church life and consider some of the busy work we see in our faith community – filling our food pantries, caring for the refugees and transporting them to places they need to go, getting communion set up for weekly Sunday morning worship, sewing quilts for Lutheran World Relief, serving on Church Council, helping with Vacation Bible School, maintaining the church building, the list goes on and on – all of these are the forms love and faith take. I do not believe Jesus would say to us, “You people are preoccupied with busy work. Leave the children, the needy, the ill, the lonely behind. Come sit and meditate for a while. This is the better part.”

I believe that to get close to the real heart of this story, we **must** look at it within the context of where it is found in Luke’s gospel. The Mary and Martha story comes right after the Parable of the Good Samaritan which we heard last week. That parable illustrates love of **neighbor** – the **action** of the Samaritan, something the Samaritan **did**. Today’s story illustrates love of **God**, and you **cannot** separate the two. You cannot say, over here is the love of neighbor and over there is the love of God. No, both are intimately intertwined, mixed together, and of one piece. They **cannot** be separated.

There is nothing wrong with Martha's busyness. And, quite honestly, there is something absolutely essential in showing one's love of God and neighbor by baking the bread and slicing the potatoes, by working on our roof fundraising event, by driving one of our refugee friends to school or Immigration Court, by filling the pantries, by helping with VBS, by participating in the work of the Green Team, by practicing welcome to all who are in the margins of society. These are the ways people show love, hospitality, and care and, frankly, we could stand to see **more** of this. Martha's act of service is a good and necessary thing. But, if we try to do this kind of service apart from hearing and receiving the nourishing, life-giving Word of the gospel, apart from the vision that comes from God, apart from what Nadia Bolz Weber calls the "MAIN thing," we will finally wear down. Mary, on the other hand, has chosen to listen to the Word. Jesus, the life-giving, living Word – the MAIN thing – is present to her, right in her house. And, if she is going to love God **and** love neighbor, show hospitality to the stranger **and** care for the lost, then **everything** depends on hearing and trusting that Word. Making room for the life-giving Spirit of God to breathe freely **into** us renews our living **and** serving. One response is **not** better than the

other. What matters most is the ability to discern what to do in each moment.

In this story, Martha's anxiety ridden busyness simply seems rather ill-timed. As my friend suggests, it's not the busyness by itself that's the problem, but maybe the timing of it. Theologian, Paul Tillich, once put it this way. "There are innumerable concerns in our lives and in human life generally which demand attention, devotion, and passion. But they do not demand infinite attention, unconditional devotion, **ultimate** passion. They are important, often very important, for you and me and for the whole of humankind. But they are not **ultimately** important...."

Figuring out what is **ultimately** important – the **MAIN** thing – and putting that **first** is the challenge of the Gospel. In fact, when talking about today's reading, I love the way Nadia Bolz Weber describes "the MAIN thing." She writes:

The main thing – the thing that will not be taken away and that we (myself included) so easily forget is our sacred story. It's a simple story, really. Even as it is unfathomable in its beauty... So here it is again...since I too often forget – there is a God who created us and all that is, this same God spoke through prophets and poets, claimed a people to be God's own and freed them from the shackles of slavery. This same God led those people through the wilderness to a land of milk and honey, and told them to **always** welcome the stranger and **protect** the foreigner so that they could remember where they

came from and what God had done for them. Then in the fullness of time, and to draw **ALL** people to himself, God came and broke our hearts like only a baby could do and made God's home in the womb of a fierce young woman as though God was saying, from now on this is how I want to be known. And Jesus God kissed lepers and befriended prostitutes and baffled authority. Jesus ate with all the wrong people and on the night before he died held up bread and told us to do the same thing and he promised us so much: that he would be with us, that forgiveness is real, that we are God's, that **people matter**, and that grilled fish makes an awesome breakfast. And from the tree on which Jesus hung he pronounced judgment on us all. "Forgive them Father, they know not what they are doing".

We never do, really, we never seem to know what we are doing and sometimes we think the Bible is going to solve that for us...that a story like Jesus' visit with Martha and Mary is going to give us a clear **moral** lesson so we can know what we are doing, [so we can justify what we do.] And then we think we've got it down and then we begin to **judge** the actions of others and the moment we do this we've once again lost the plot.

Oh, yes. The sacred story of God's love **IS** the MAIN THING!

We need to hear this story over and over and over again, and it can never be taken away from us because it is **always** forming **us**. As we gather around Word and Sacrament, it is always shaping who we are as God's people, as the body of Christ. Today's reading is not about hearing OR doing. It is about hearing AND doing. The good news is that when we sit down and eat our fill of the life-giving Word of God, when we have been nourished at this table, we **will also** be ready to put hands and feet, hearts and minds to work.