

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes it seems that scripture..and even the gospel stories...particularly around those parables that Jesus often used as illustration to the disciples...well, are more like Sudoku. Or the NY Times Sunday crossword puzzle. Sometimes it is a stretch for us to understand what was written those thousands of years ago. The preacher often seems to assume the role of translator.

But, Martha and Mary in this story....well, that is another matter.

It is somewhat charming how today's short, four-verse gospel story is woven into the greater tapestry of the story of Jesus all those centuries ago. We tend to focus on the "big stories", the ones with high drama. Like his triumphant entry into Jerusalem which we open with on Palm Sunday. We have visions of hundreds cheering, "Hosanna! The savior has come!"

And then, not a week later, we have the extreme high drama of his Passion story...betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, total abandonment, death.

But here, we just have a casual moment. The shortest of stories, four verses long. And it probably happened, and was repeated numerous times during the earthly ministry of Jesus...moving about from village to village with his disciples.

They enter the village where Martha and her sister Mary reside. And Martha invites him to come inside and stay.

For how long, we do not know. Were the disciples welcomed as well? We do not know that either. But what we DO know is that this was a culture that **thrived** in the absence of Red Roof Inn, Comfort Inn, Motel 6, and the like. A world and time that welcomed...in fact needed...face-to-face people contact. In fact, we might consider how all the motel chains today, with their internet reservation systems and slick TV ads and all, distinguish our time from that of 2,000 years ago. Our bishops have challenged us to live into a "radical hospitality", and we might think that this is one way to do it.

I would suspect that many, if not most, of us have lived today's story of Mary and Martha. Maybe we do not entertain in our homes in the ways that was common thousands of years ago. And, maybe we do not normally let virtual strangers stay in our beds and eat our refrigerators bare for days at a time.

But, maybe...for the purpose of engaging our imagination into this story... it is enough that we

have the summer family picnic at our home. Or we have all the kids and grandkids over for Thanksgiving dinner, and pray that one of our adult kids will finally wake up and host the whole tribe for Christmas or Easter instead of at his or her home.

So, when we have had guests over to eat, we have been there.....doing all the work of getting the house ready....AND getting the meals ready....AND cleaning up in the process. Slaving away like that... when the other person in the picture just sits around and does not help.

You are hot and perspiring over that stove, while “Mary”, who could help...does not. You have a mountain of dishes to clean which cover your counters, while “Mary” is parked in neutral and does not see that you could use some help even cleaning off the table.

And, here you are with guests witnessing all this. Important guests, for goodness sake!! She calls him “Lord”...and he sees this stack of dishes? Who has not cringed over that scene?

We do not know if Martha first asked Mary for help. But, if she did, Mary might have ignored her, or worse, refused to help...creating further embarrassment in front of company.

So, Martha goes on the offensive, getting Jesus involved....challenging Jesus directly...”Lord, don’t YOU care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself?....”

Poor Jesus. Taking a break from the road, enjoying the hospitality of Martha’s home at HER request, and now she is in his face for something that is not his fault. More like getting in God’s face for something that is not God’s fault. It is not as if we have never heard of that before. Or it is not as if we have not done that ourselves, right?

Jesus softly says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing”.

“**Need of only one thing!**”, Martha thinks to herself. In justifying Mary’s choice of the use of her time, is he saying that she should ignore her work? When, or how, will ANYTHING get done if we all just sit around?!” Boy, as a person of action all my life, counting every ticking minute, I get that.

If he **did** intend to put the brakes to doing work, it seems to fly in the face of the lesson of last week’s message of the Good Samaritan. The early part of the Samaritan story lifts up love of God, neighbor and self, and Jesus concludes by saying, "Go and do likewise"...calling for an active, "doing" discipleship. The Mary-Martha story seems to shift into reverse. Jesus criticizes Martha for her worry and distraction and affirms Mary for listening...thus calling for a "being" discipleship. No wonder it looks like a puzzle. So confusing. What is a Christian to do?

As followers of Christ, we understand that we cannot lay around our entire lives doing nothing, and just wait for our eternal rest and peace at life’s end. We are called to be a people of mission. Of

action. Of mercy and ministry. Of commitment to something, instead of avoidance from everything.

And as followers of Christ, we are called to the great commandment...to love the Lord our God with all our minds, and heart, and strength. That love calls us to a commitment to live within our understanding of God's call to each of us, and to let the love and knowledge of God grow within us.

When Jesus rebukes Martha softly for the distraction that she is creating, it is not intended to create a tension, or debate over the active or passive role of the one who loves. Instead, Jesus causes us here to reflect upon the appropriateness of the response to the situation.

The wounded man needed the Samaritan to love him actively...needed him to bind his wounds and arrange for his care. Yet, when Jesus visits Martha and Mary, and he has human needs for food and hospitality, his is a Godly visitation. It is more appropriate to focus on the spiritual food that he offers rather than the food that Martha is preparing.

Instead of teaching us that it is better to sit than to do, the story of Mary and Martha teaches us to discern...to set priorities carefully...to seek the better thing, the good portion, whatever that might be in the situation in which we find ourselves. Mary has chosen the "better part"...sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening.....being a disciple. There will be time enough for action. First, the disciple must learn from the master...otherwise, the disciple's busyness may create more problems than it solves.

For our part, we, too, are busy about many things....and are troubled and distracted. We, also, need to choose the better part...to sit at the feet of Jesus, so to speak....to steep ourselves in prayer and to seek the Lord's direction. Only then can we be assured that our busyness will further the Lord's business. Only then can we expect the Lord to bless our work.

So, let us be sensitive to those who express their love for family, friends, and Jesus by working in the kitchen. Let us remember the relationship of this story to the parable of the Good Samaritan.

There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be "Yes". Not "either/or", but rather "yes/and".

Just when we might think there was no getting the story in a fresh way, we are reminded of the very essence of the word of the living God. Every time we revisit these stories, we have new understandings, or insights...as we continue to grow within God's creation through the lives that God blesses us with....in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.