

From The Pastor

From many perspectives in life we tend to work from an 'either or' stance, rather than a both-and. If we see ourselves as one thing, we do not often see ourselves as the opposite. Some of this perspective is internal, coming from our sense of who we are and how we want to present ourselves to others. Much of it too, comes from the culture and the relationships that form and influence who we are. Socially, we not only want to fit in, we want to carve a unique and positive role for ourselves in relation to those around us.

Across a spectrum, some people are on the far end of the extrovert side, while others hold the introvert end of the line. We all, one way or the other, fit somewhere in between these two poles. We tend to claim one end of the spectrum, not thinking of our self as being any part to the other end. Yet both hold a necessary balance to the other. Those who find a peaceful inner wholeness are those who can claim their stronger side while allowing and integrating the other side of their personality. To reject one end or the other is to find inner unrest and conflict.

As much as we want to choose either Mary or Martha, the point of the reading is that we accept both-and. Note that Mary and Martha are sisters. In religious language, 'sister' implies a oneness, a strong bond of mutuality and united strength. Sisters are soul mates. We are better united with ourselves, than divided from within.

To seek to choose one over the other is to lose the united strength of both together. Still, the Martha's of the world will staunchly stake their claim and stand strong. Though more peacefully, the Mary's will do the same.

Notice that Jesus is invited into the home of Martha. Home is not a house. Martha is inviting Jesus into her way of living and acting, into her way of being. With this invitation into herself, she is inviting the influence that Jesus may have on her. This is the dynamic of the story. Jesus is identified as Lord and Master, and Martha invites him to fulfill that role in her 'home'.

To find balance, Martha and Mary must accept and surrender to the gift of each other. Most in our culture identify with Martha. She is the doer. We like doers, and we like those who get things done. We empathize with Martha, and agree with her plea for help.

Mary is not the active one. She represents the inner activity of the soul; that part of the personality that supports, nurtures, gives meaning and direction, and who makes the activity of life fruitful. In the story, Martha is out of touch, disconnected with her inner Mary. Her activity, while necessary and productive, leaves her worried, distracted, and with no peace.

The world is filled with Martha's out of touch with the inner Mary. Perhaps we even resent that Jesus sides with Mary, calling her portion the 'better part'. The better part refers to what is good, or for the greater good. Good is the bridge or connection to God. God alone is good and the only source of our inner goodness. Connected to our inner goodness our outer activity will be both peaceful and fruitful.

One would be very imprudent to choose one side of this balance at the expense of the other. Any of us could give many examples of Martha's out of touch with their inner Mary. These are the multi-taskers who pride themselves on their capacity to accomplish much. In the process however, many are stepped on or overlooked. The doer lives with worry and dissatisfaction, wondering what it is all for.

In this context, the story is not only about women. Men are equally at risk, also in need of the essential balance of the inner good that roots their activity in God. Many men have lost themselves in the activity of doing and achieving because they would not accept the inner balance of meaning and purpose rooted in God. This pain has touched many of our families.

In the story, Martha wants Mary to help her. The help Martha wants is with the activity, with the doing. This is not what she needs. When the activity has lost sight of the inner meaning and direction, more hands will not lighten the load of distracted agitation. Martha needs the peace of Mary's inner calm. She needs the 'better part', the inner good that roots her activity in the 'home' that is the heart of Jesus.

Notice how Jesus addresses Martha's complaint: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things...' Martha wants Mary to be another Martha. This will give no balance or peace. More may get done, but to what end? Accomplishing more does not equal more peace or inner freedom. We must learn to allow and value both the Martha and the Mary within ourselves to find the inner good that is our better part in God. Then our activity will bear greater fruit for the greater good.

Let these slower days of summer (and I hope they are slower for you) be a time to refocus your doing with your being. Being a Martha-Martha will leave your Mary dormant and her gifts unused. Being a Mary-Martha is the better part.

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