

## 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

### Luke 10: 38-42 – *Hanging out with Jesus*

Jesus is travelling towards Jerusalem and on his way stops off at the village of Bethany, calling in at the house of his friends, Mary and Martha. Martha welcomes Jesus, makes him feel at home, and then gets back to her tasks. Meanwhile, her sister, Mary, sits down in the front room with Jesus, hanging on every word he utters, but Martha remains occupied with the practical things that have to be done. You know how it is. It's a familiar domestic situation.

I wonder how many of us identify with Martha. You're working in the kitchen, finishing the meal preparations, while others are enjoying the company of your guest. You could do with a hand, and as the sauce is about to burn, you let your frustrations boil over. You go into the lounge and blurt out, "Don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand." But then the guest turns to you, "You're 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."

There's nothing more frustrating (at least this is how I find it) than the person who sits around seemingly doing nothing practical when there's work to be done. On the other hand, there's nothing more irritating than the person who gets so het up that they can't sit down and be still for a few minutes. The story of Mary and Martha is often interpreted like this – as a comparison between a life of prayer and contemplation, over and against a life of active and practical ministry. Quite naturally, we end up siding with either Martha or Mary, or perhaps both of them as we try to reconcile those two dimensions within ourselves – and it can leave us feeling guilty for either not praying enough or not doing enough good works. But I don't think that interpretation does the story justice.

There's a shocking element to it, and that's the praise Jesus gives to Mary. Jesus wasn't chatting to Mary about the weather. He was teaching her. He was treating her as a disciple, and in the first century that wasn't done. Women occupied themselves with household tasks. They didn't study theology. There were two contemporary Rabbinic sayings: "It's better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman," and "It's better to teach a daughter to be a prostitute than to teach her the Torah." So, what was happening between Jesus and Mary was totally out of order and Martha was doing exactly what was expected of her. She was working hard to be hospitable.

So, what's Jesus saying to us? This isn't a comparison between a focus on housework versus attending a Bible study group. It's not about doing versus being. This story follows on the heels of the parable about the Good Samaritan, and if there was ever a teaching on the importance of practical, hands-on love, it's that. So, let's be clear: there's nothing wrong with doing.

It seems to me that this story is about priorities and attitude. Martha's problem wasn't that she was doing something practical, but that all her doing distracted her. The word that's translated 'distracted' implies that she was being pulled in different directions – being tugged this way and that and left with no space to focus on what really matters.

On the other hand, Mary sat, focused on Jesus. When Martha complains to Jesus about him not caring that Mary has left all the work up to her, he replies, very kindly (and I read this not as a criticism, but as an invitation), "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part..." The better part is about how Mary has discovered the most valuable relationship in life. Being with Jesus, focused on her relationship with him, she's discovered what it means to be a daughter of God. She's found that her true value is in being God's beloved child.

Martha, who wants to be the perfect hostess, has become so worried and distracted that she can't be truly present with Jesus, causing her to drive a wedge between her sister and herself, and between Jesus and herself. She's missed out on the 'one thing needed.' Perhaps, like many of us, amid all her doing she's got lured into thinking that her value and purpose in life is to be found in what she does, rather than in who she is. We can tend to measure our worth by how full our diary is, by how many things we can tick off our to-do lists. We value others and ourselves by our performance. Maybe the one thing needed, for us as it was for Martha, is to simply receive Jesus' presence with gratitude – to sit at his feet long enough to let his presence carry over into our serving.

Much of our busyness and distraction stems from the best of intentions. We want to provide for our families, to serve those about us, to build up our faith community, and yes, we want to serve God. Indeed, where would the church be without its Marthas, (in the male and female versions) – those who perform the tasks of service so vital to making our community function? Yet, if all our activities leave us with no time to be still in the Lord's presence, we're likely to end up, distracted, anxious and troubled – alienated from God and one another. We'll end up with a kind of service that is devoid of love and joy and is resentful of others. Amid all our well-intentioned activity, we can forget the One whom we ultimately serve, and who wants to love us.

I suspect it's a lesson we have to learn and relearn – to give ourselves the time to simply hang out with Jesus – to be with him – to allow ourselves to be nourished by him.

However exciting or challenging, however important and essential our tasks may be, we need to regularly stop and hear 'the one thing needed' – that we are God's beloved children, and that there's nothing we can do that earns that love, and nothing we can do to lose it. We're valued and treasured not for what we do – not for how well we perform – but because we're God's beloved ones.

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