

Sermon, Fr. William Albinger
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 11C 2010
July 18, 2010

In the Name of our one living God who creates abundantly, loves extravagantly and sustains eternally: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'd like to start my sermon with a few questions. How many of you have heard this story of Martha and Mary before? Yes, it is a favorite story from Luke. How many of us have had "Martha moments"? How many have had "Mary moments"? Now the important question – Where do we find ourselves most often – with Martha or with Mary?

This familiar Gospel story of Luke's has been interpreted over the centuries in a number of ways: the contemplative life of prayer and study is superior to going out into the world; Martha and Mary are polar opposites and you have to make a choice between work and devotion; and, God help us, it is about the appropriate role for women – either in the kitchen or at a man's feet listening to him!

I teach this lesson at the preschool chapel sometime during the year. The little ones see the picture and read the characters' faces and immediately get the emotion. The picture of Martha in the kitchen is great. She's whipping up something in a bowl. The kids see that whatever she is whipping up is nothing compared to the lather she has already whipped herself into! They see her looking into the living room and immediately realize that if looks can kill, Mary is in trouble.

Let's look at Mary. What is she doing? She is providing hospitality to a guest. That's a good thing. In Jesus' times that was important and is always a kindness. What is wrong with what she is doing? Nothing I can see. Somebody has to do it. So why is Mary's part the better part?

I don't think what Martha is doing is the problem but rather where she is emotionally. She has moved her focus from the purpose of her work to the work itself. There is a disconnect. Perhaps she is too hurried or demands too much of herself. Perhaps she has taken on too much and is creating a feast when a simple sandwich would do? Whatever it is, her purpose is lost and she is filled with frustration. Haven't we all been there?

What does she do with these emotions of hers? She displaces her emotions of anxiety or unhappiness onto to her sister Mary who is out there in the living room lollygagging while she is slaving away! Somehow, we not sure why, Martha's emotions are now Mary's responsibility! Does this sound familiar?

Now frustration and anxiety turn to blame and anger now that they have a target in Mary! Isn't that the way this usually works? But now it escalates. Martha gets vindictive and pulls her guest into the fray. "Jesus, don't you care that my sister isn't helping me and I'm doing all the work?" Now, somehow, it is Jesus' fault!

Jesus is probably wondering how he got in the middle of all this. What does he do? He doesn't take the bait! Jesus doesn't respond to the situation but only to what is in front of him – an angry Martha. He points out that her anger and frustration are because she has become distracted, she has lost sight of *why* she is doing what she is doing. She has lost focus and cannot see the purpose of her work and being. Mary has not.

Jesus points out that Mary has chosen the better part – not because it is better to listen and hang out with the guest – but because she has kept her focus on what is important, on what gives meaning to her life and work. She is focused on the Word of God that called all things into being and calls us into God’s very life.

So it is not an either/or situation but a both/and situation. It is not thought versus work – we need to do both. Today, we live in a world full of words. We are bombarded with so many words and images that we do not have time to think about them. They have become distractions that call us away from who we are and why we do what we do. I remember party telephone lines and TV when there were only 3 channels – and two of them had lousy reception! Now we carry around iPhones that let us read our email, talk on the phone, and watch YouTube 24/7! We live in a world that command perpetual partial attention! No wonder we get frustrated and angry! Words in this confusion are used to fool, mislead and manipulate. Our politicians do this, our advertisers do this, the media does this, and – God help us – sometimes churches do this!

The “*better part*” that Jesus commends is time for reflection, time to find our ethical compass, time to find that which gives meaning to our lives and work and relationships. Martha and Mary were both doing good things. However, Mary was learning the “*why*” that gives meaning while Martha was distracted with the “*doing*” without focus or purpose.

All our readings today have this common thread – of people and societies getting lost, losing the why of their lives, forgetting their purpose and ethical compasses, and becoming distracted and self-centered. Amos is a tough Book of the Bible to read. He confronts a society that has tucked God and God’s will away in a corner and focused instead on wealth and

power. Justice and ethics got lost. It poses a lot of questions to our society. Our Psalm contrasts two ways of life – one centered on the eternal God as Source of All and the other centered on delusions of control through wealth and power. Our reading from Colossians opens with an early Church hymn of joy about the peace that is found when we become centered in Jesus Christ “who holds all things together.”

Luke is a great author. He takes all these issues that are found in nations throughout history and puts them in Martha and Mary’s kitchen and living room – so that we can see them in our own daily lives. He leads us to ask what do we value the most in our lives? What give our lives meaning? What would we really miss if we didn’t have it? What things are most precious to us? What gives meaning and joy to our lives? How much attention do we pay to them – or are we too distracted?

Let us pray: Dear Lord, send your Spirit upon us and our families and communities that we may always stayed centered in You and find there the peace and joy of your grace that give meaning and purpose to our lives. Amen.