

**6 Pentecost
July 21, 2019**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

I know today's Gospel about Mary and Martha is very familiar, but let's just see if there is something important in it that we can take away. And all you guys: please don't tune out just because this is about a Mary and a Martha. In your heads, think of it as maybe a Ralph and a Ronald...or something like that. Because obviously there is an important message in what Jesus had to say. But in case anyone does...tune out, that is...In a nutshell Jesus is telling us that people/persons matter more than anything, and that each of us has to be sure we have a balance in our lives which enables TIME and FOCUS for our spiritual journeys.

Remember that it is this home, in Bethany, the home of Martha and her sister Mary, that became the refuge for Jesus in his last brutal days in Jerusalem. So, what he has to say here is pretty important. Through this story Jesus is teaching all who would listen, that paying attention to people, including one's self, is far more important than doing THINGS.

It's easy, I think, for us to imagine this situation from today's reading and to sympathize with Martha, who seems to get a rough deal. Most of us have been in a situation where we seem to be doing all the work while someone else is sitting around. We readily picture the scene: Martha welcomes Jesus into her home, feeling greatly honored that He is her guest. Then, while she is in the kitchen working to prepare him a meal, her sister, Mary, instead of helping her, stays in the other room with Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, is just thrilled and can hardly believe her good fortune. She at last gets some time to spend with Jesus. She is just totally absorbed in what he has to say. Perhaps it crosses her mind that she ought to go and help Martha in the kitchen, but she just can't bear to drag herself away from the Presence of Jesus, even for a moment.

Meanwhile, Martha is getting increasingly frustrated. When it all gets to be too much for her, she appeals to Jesus about it and asks him to tell Mary to get to work and help her. Well,... we know that Jesus has a way of turning a person's complaint into a lesson for them. His reply is rather enigmatic: He says, "Martha, you're concerned about a lot of things. But there's only one thing that's really important. And Mary has made the better choice." He is reminding her, and us, that **people** are more important than **things**. They themselves, all the Marthas, are even more important than getting things done. Jesus was acknowledging Mary's choice to spend time in his Presence and to listen attentively. She evidently had the gift that many of you have, but don't always use, the gift of really listening and the gift of discerning what is truly important. She was able to listen ardently and deeply beyond words.

Martha, however, was worried about a lot of things and was distracted with the business of serving.
/// Have you ever given a party and put so much effort into it, not only prior to the event, but during the party, to be sure everything was just right, that everything went smoothly, everyone was taken

care of....so much so that as people were leaving, you realized that you hadn't had a chance to talk with them, and that you, in fact, had missed the party! I know I have. So, I can relate to Martha.

Probably most of us do believe deep down that our relationships with God and with the people around us are more important than the things we accomplish or produce. But somehow, we allow ourselves to use our energies as if salvation itself depended on what we **do**, what we **accomplish**. Just as Martha put her chores ahead of being with her guest, we are often prone to treat the projects of our lives with more time and energy than we do our relationships. What would happen to life, as we live it, if we were to work as hard at understanding those closest to us as we do at perfecting our houses and our other projects? What kind of legacy would we leave our children if we could show them that the true rewards for time spent in listening with interest to each other are greater than the pay-offs that come with Martha's approach to things?

Distractions from knowing God's Presence are not necessarily selfish activities. On the contrary, they may be worthwhile charitable activities, as was clearly the case with Martha. Distractions from God's Presence might be being over involved in helping out. One church I served many years ago had a bazaar every year and as the day for it came nearer, some of the people started missing out on worship so they could devote more time to preparing for the church function.

How many people work such long hours that there is no time left for the ones they love? Or, how many can simply not say no when asked to volunteer for yet one more thing when they are already over committed? If we are caring people, it is easy to become preoccupied with trying to take care of everything in the face of so many apparent needs. And...how much effort do we spend trying to fix things that are in fact out of our hands? How often have we agreed to do something because we felt we **had** to, but then perhaps did it under duress. All of us have lives with responsibilities. We have people in our lives with many expectations of us. The commercials in the media offer us a whole list of things we should be doing to improve our lives.

In contrast to that, how much time do we actually spend in quiet devotion, just sitting attentively in the Presence of our Lord? And, what is the quality of our prayer time? Does it get pushed aside because of other THINGS that need our time and attention? Is it rushed like many things in our lives? Is it a time when we hurriedly present God with a list of our most pressing needs? Or,... do we pause to dwell serenely in his Presence? Basking in His Love?/////

The 17th Century mystic, Brother Lawrence, wrote:

"The most holy practice, and the most **essential** for the spiritual life, is the practice of the Presence of God." The Practice of the Presence of God.

Some people think that in this busy modern age not only is there never any time for stillness and quiet, but that it is merely an escape from reality. I like what the contemplative author, Thomas Merton, wrote:

"The movement of the soul AWAY from the world into the presence of God is ALSO a movement into the heart of the world."

In other words: The time we take to be with God actually strengthens us for ALL of life. The story of Mary and Martha may sound harsh when Martha is being so gracious to her honored guest. But it is told to make the point that we must make time for THE most important thing: The Main Thing...which is quiet time in the Presence of our Lord.

Think of it: If we plan to spend time with a really good friend, we make sure that we guard that time. It doesn't matter what we will do with that time, if indeed we have anything planned at all. But, that time with that person is still very, very important to us.

So it is with God. There is immeasurable value in just taking time to be with God, to just BE...not necessarily to ask for anything, nor even to give thanks, important though that is, but just to be still and know his Presence./// In fact, **Prayer** is **consciously** being with the Lord. Consciously realizing our prayer as an encounter with Jesus, just as Mary did. It is that being totally absorbed with the Presence of God that is transformative for our entire lives.///

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, wrote:

"Stillness and silence are of supreme importance to our soul's health, and the neglect of them is extremely damaging to the Christian life."

In the coming week, if you do not already do this, why not plan to pause and spend a brief while in a silent encounter, just being with God. And, even more, in that time, **intend** to be aware of the presence of Christ. It may be helpful to picture Jesus or say his name to yourself. Stop and spend some time in silence; imagine; picture, that he is with you; that you are with him. Undoubtedly you will find it very refreshing and ultimately, strengthening.

It could help us all to think about today's Gospel story, and consider whether we want to spend our time like Martha, keeping busy with the many **things** of life, including the well- intended activities, OR do we want to be more like Mary, taking time to be in the presence of our Lord, listening intently for his loving direction for our lives. Jesus is telling us that there is nothing in the world which is worthy of being treated as more important than people and that includes ourselves. No doubt, Martha believed that what she was doing was very important. She was probably convinced that she was simply being a good hostess, making sure that everything was just right. But, Jesus had not come to see a clean house or have the perfect meal. He had come to be with his two friends. "You are concerned about so many things," he said to Martha..."So many distractions; only one thing is important."

Now, I hope no-one here thinks I am undervaluing the gift of Hospitality; certainly not those who provide our wonderful times of fellowship at our Coffee Hours. But, it **is** to suggest that perhaps most of us have probably been the Martha in the story. How life giving if we would make more Mary time.

AMEN