

Sermon, Proper 11C

Luke 11:1-13

Preached Sunday, July 22, 2007 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

I have in my hand the results of an impulse purchase.

You know how it goes: you're there in the store, waiting in line to pay for what you originally intended to buy, when something on display catches your eye. You pick it up, it looks interesting, and before you have time to reflect, you say to the cashier, "I'll take this, too."

As impulse purchases go, this wasn't completely worthless. It's one of those special publications by Time Magazine, called "America: An illustrated Modern History, 1900-2007." Its goal is to give the reader a visual survey of our country in the 20th Century and the first few years of this one. Most of them are action photos. We see Americans working, defending our country, protesting, building, entertaining, inventing, politicking, marching, dancing, singing, producing, creating, sporting — even preaching and occasionally praying.

But the clear preference is for action: getting out there, rolling up our sleeves, and making a difference by what we do. It's as American as baseball, hot dogs and apple pie. Between being and doing, we and most of the Western world have made our choice: "Let's get busy," we say, "Show us the beef," "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

So, it's against this cultural backdrop that we hear the story of Jesus paying someone a visit. On his way to Jerusalem, he stops at the home of two close friends, Martha and her sister, Mary. Jesus himself has been going and doing: preaching, teaching, healing, travelling, and calling people to follow him. But, as Luke's Gospel makes clear, Jesus also takes time to not do — and just be. He stops and listens to people whose voices normally wouldn't be heard. He attends corporate worship regularly. He enjoys meals with his followers, with outcasts and religious leaders. And he bathes all of his actions in prayer, sometimes spending entire nights in prayer (cf. Luke 6:12 & 9:28). Jesus seemed to have had the right balance between doing and being, giving and receiving, knowing when to be active and when to be still.

We can think of Martha and Mary as symbolizing these two basic impulses. Martha represents active ministry: rushing around in eager service, making sure everything is just right for her honored guest. Then, there's Mary, who represents contemplative ministry: sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening deeply and taking to heart his life-giving words. So far, so good. One sister going from the kitchen to the dining room, getting the meal on the table, while the other pays attention to the guest. But in the midst of this, Martha has what we can only call a hissy fit. She's been watching Mary sitting there, not lifting a finger to lighten her load, and she can't take it anymore. So she asks Jesus to intervene: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me" (10:40). Can't you just picture it — a genuinely awkward moment, right in front of Jesus?

As usual, he is so wise and cool in his response. He doesn't feel the need to defend himself, nor does he take sides. But he tries to calm Martha and point out that her sister is committing no sin, even though her behavior is neither "active" nor "productive." "Martha, Martha, ... Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (v. 42).

Some people think this means that Jesus makes a clear choice between two kinds of service, and that contemplative ministries are more important than active ones. But the Bible makes clear that both kinds of ministry are vital in the Christian life! Last week, we heard the story of the Good Samaritan. It's no coincidence that these two stories appear back-to-back in Luke. The moral of the first story is to "go and do," while the other is, "stay and listen." Choosing to sit at the feet of Jesus instead of actively serving means to choose from two options, both of which are good. Jesus says that Mary chose the "better part."

(please see reverse)

He doesn't say that Martha chose the wrong part, the bad part, or the worst part. But, in that moment — with Jesus there in their midst — the “better” choice would be to put down the serving trays and bowls of food and join Mary at the feet of the Master. A simple meal with one or two dishes would have been enough.

I think Jesus said what he did for two reasons — both of them relating to Martha's state of mind. Mary was focusing on just one thing, while her sister was not. “You are worried and distracted by many things,” he says to Martha, but “there is need of only one thing” (v. 41). Instead of a contrast between active and contemplative ministries, Jesus is drawing a contrast between two different attitudes towards all ministry — and all of life. The first approach is single-minded, attentive and devoted; the other is harried, anxious and pulled in many different directions. One state of mind helps us learn, reflect and receive; the other is divided, frenetic, and distracted. One is calmly focused outward; the other is self-centered even when it thinks it's busy serving others. Most of us, I think, can relate to Martha. With all good intentions, she just had too much on her plate and too much on her mind. She was stressed out, and feeling sorry for herself. And most of us would like to be more like Mary — able to discern when it's time to just sit, listen and enjoy the presence of someone we love.

The second reason Jesus said what he did to Martha is because she lost perspective. In the midst of feeling so anxious and distracted, she couldn't see that she was being unfair to her sister and acting inappropriately towards Jesus, her guest of honor. A good way to understand this is to look at our stained-glass window of this scene. Notice how the artist has positioned the three characters. In the bottom of the window is Mary, in the lowest position. She's sitting in the customary position for a student or a disciple. We should note that it was an extraordinary thing for Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, to allow a woman to sit at his feet in this way. Not only does he allow it, he even encourages it — which tells us something about his regard for women. Next, in the middle position, we have Jesus. He is seated, which is the traditional position for rabbis when they're teaching.

Finally, there's Martha, standing above everyone else — bless her heart! Notice how the artist has depicted her. She seems to have stopped by, on her way from the dining room back to the kitchen (in my mind, I imagine that she's run back to look for that special spice to add the final touch to that fifth course). See how her arm and hand are in the exasperated, pleading position? She won't even turn and face Jesus or Mary completely. Do you see what happens when we become so burdened and anxious from taking on too many tasks? We can become exasperated and look down our noses at others, without meaning to — please don't ask me how I know this!!

It would be easy to categorize people and ministries by saying that some are Marys and some are Marthas, some are contemplative and some are active. But, in the end, I think there's a bit of Mary and a bit of Martha in all of us. Jesus showed us that discipleship involves both: acting and doing, as well as listening and receiving. In our culture, we need to be reminded that Mary chose the “better part” — to take in the words of Christ that give us abundant life and show us the way to grow into the image and likeness of God. It's not a bad idea to ask yourself, “How often do I do this in my daily and weekly walk with God?”

If you want a real-life image of this, you don't have to look any farther than one of our ministry groups here at St. Philip's. Since its inception several years ago, our prayer-shawl knitting ministry has created hundreds of shawls for people who are ill or going through other difficulties. When each shawl is being made, the knitter prays for the person who is to receive it. Imagine the hundreds of hours of labor that went into the creation of so many hand-made items. With this in mind, you might jump to the conclusion that the Prayer Shawl Ministry is filled with only Martha-minded women. But look a bit closer. As a way to help the members of this ministry keep some perspective, they schedule a time each month of working without conversation. You might even see them one morning in the Parlor, with the door closed — lost in knitting and prayer and silence.

Now that, my sisters and brothers, is *the better part*.