

I wonder how many of us here this morning are identifying with Martha? And how many of us wish we could be more like Mary? Perhaps we claimed a bit of our Mary during the early days of COVID when we gave ourselves permission to find our own inner Mary without feeling guilty. Although each of us are a mix of both Martha and Mary, the degree to which we can distract ourselves from listening to Jesus through practiced adherence to a to-do list varies according to personalities and life circumstances.

The fact of the matter is that some of us, unless we have dedicated ourselves to a contemplative lifestyle, feel guilty for spending time in contemplative pursuits. I remember early on thinking that quiet time was a waste of time. I had bought into the American success story about accomplishment and achievement as the mark of my self-worth. The message from the American lifestyle seemed to be that we must accomplish things in order to be valued.

It's not wrong to want to achieve things for the greater good. Getting things done is a necessary part of life. The problem arises when we are lured into thinking that our self-worth hinges on how much and how well we can do stuff. The relationship between achievement and self-esteem can skew our ability to love ourselves as God loves us, and God loves us before we even lift a finger!

You see, we're not human-doings. We're human-beings. Human-doings can fall into the trap of seeking validation through what they have accomplished. They might only love themselves if they have crossed off their to-do list or if they have met their expectations of what constitutes a successful day. But what if we were to switch out the American criteria of value for Jesus' criteria of value? In the upside-down world of the gospel, achievement is not the measure of human value. According to the Gospel, human value is a given. We are loved by a God who is constantly seeking us out. We are valuable not because of what we make of our lives, but because God values us. God values us so highly that God sent God's son Jesus to seek us out and find us. When Jesus finds us at whatever task or quiet moment we are in, he asks to be let in.

Martha has already let him into her home. She has welcomed him generously and wants to provide him with the highest level of care possible. But she has focused her attention on the tasks themselves, rather than on the person for whom she is

performing them. She is worried and distracted by many things. Even though she has welcomed Jesus into her home, she is practically ignoring him. I know what this is like. It happens when I pay so much attention to what everyone needs that I don't pause long enough to really listen and be present. I am there physically, but not always in a listening or empathetic way.

What would happen if an entire church community behaved in such a way? What if we focused on everything we have to do that comes with being a community, but didn't cultivate a culture of listening, care, empathy, and compassion? What if churches behaved more like Martha than Mary? Where would we be? We would probably exhaust ourselves. As important as everything we do is, instead of feeding us, it would exhaust us. We would go home feeling cranky instead of fulfilled. Getting together would become a drag instead of a joy. We would stop looking forward to being together and start avoiding church.

Bishop Thomas came for his visitation with the Vestry this past week. Near the end of our meeting, the bishop read the notes he had taken when he had visited with us the last time and remarked to us that he had never been with a congregation that talked so much about spirituality. This year's visit was similar in this respect, and we gave ourselves time to listen to Scripture and to one another as part of the meeting. Members of the Vestry were able to speak personally and from the heart about their hunger for God.

So, back to the story about Martha and Mary. If we give a more literal meaning to the translation of the Greek, Mary is beside Jesus' feet hearing his word. When Martha complains about her sister to Jesus, he tells her that Mary has chosen the one thing necessary, namely, to attend to Jesus' presence without being distracted by the tasks that are part of providing hospitality. He isn't criticizing Martha for serving. After all, it is precisely later on in Luke that Jesus tells his disciples: "I am among you as one who serves." Serving is part of discipleship. What he is pointing out is that the manner of her serving is anxious and troubled because she has made her tasks more important than the reason she is doing them. Jesus isn't making a hierarchy out of serving versus listening. He is teaching the sisters that they are to listen to him and to his word whether they are working or being still.

Joan Chittister writes that according to the ancient wisdom of St. Benedict, time was to be spent in prayer, in sacred reading, in work, and in community participation. In other words, it was to be spent on listening to the Word, on study, on making life better for others, and on community building. No one thing got exaggerated out of all proportion to the other dimensions of life. This applies to us, too. In all things, we are invited to remember that Jesus is present, and to keep a balance amongst work, prayer, study, together time and alone time.

Martha allows herself to become distracted in her serving, and then seems to make a value-judgment on the differing ways the two sisters have chosen to welcome Jesus. Martha has concentrated on serving a meal, but in doing so, her hospitality loses its focus. The focus should be on the person and presence of her guest and Lord, Jesus. Instead, she judges her sister as being either lax or neglectful for not helping her serve. Instead of enjoying being with Jesus, she complains to him about the deficiencies of her sister. Both Martha and Mary are Jesus' friends, but in the story, it seems as if Mary is the one who is actually *enjoying* the friendship!

What if whole parishes were like these two friends of Jesus? Would it follow, then, that the parishes who focus on "church" end up feeling resentful, and those who focus on Jesus find joy in his friendship? Are parishes who focus on Jesus the ones who take the time to enjoy being with him—to listen to his word and to be mindful of his presence? Would these parishes serve with joy and be more fulfilled? This past week Bishop Thomas seemed to be assuring us of precisely this: When we sit at the feet of Jesus to listen to his word, everything else seems to fall into place, where this enough love and joy for everyone. AMEN.