

The Liberation of Martha! Reading: Luke 10:38-42 Proper 11/C 7-17-22

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Are you a Martha or are you a Mary? Today's gospel story (featuring Martha and Mary) always gets some mixed reactions, especially among the Marthas in our midst. A close friend, who is definitely a *Martha*, says that without the Marthas in this world, nothing would get done. She wants us to imagine a gathering of Marthas, just sitting down in contemplation with all the Marys of the world. What would all those guests do when no one got fed or dinner never happened? Wouldn't there be a lot of grumbling and outcry like: Where's the food? Who is hosting this event anyway? Isn't serving others a major part of Christian love? These are all good questions and while service and action are major parts of the Christian journey, they are not the focus of today's gospel message.

Jesus said to Martha: "You are 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." (Lk. 10:41-42) What is the core issue going on here and what wisdom can we glean from this gospel story for our life today? The title of today's sermon is *The Liberation of Martha!* Let's take a closer look at the context.

Jesus and his companions are on their way to Jerusalem. They enter a village and are welcomed into the home of Martha and Mary. Martha then goes about her household tasks in order to receive them properly and provide them with nourishment. But instead of delighting in their company, Martha has an anxiety attack. She becomes distracted and tries to triangulate Jesus into forcing Mary back into the kitchen. But Mary wants to be with Jesus and continues to sit in the living room to listen to the conversation among her guests. This is a rather radical act for a woman in 1st C Palestine, where women were viewed as second class citizens and expected to stay behind the scenes and tend to the domestic chores. But then again, the gospel promotes a liberating posture as it attempts to break down barriers, especially for those on the margins.

Unfortunatly, what should have been a delightful visit for all involved, turns into a depressing scene. First of all, Martha is worried. The Greek word used here is *merimnaō*, an old verb for worry and anxiety. It literally means to be divided into parts, drawn in opposite directions, pulled apart. Worrying is a form of thinking about the

future that leaves a person feeling anxious and apprehensive. Worry is a chain of thoughts and images that represents an attempt to solve a problem whose outcome is uncertain because the future is uncertain. And while we can plan for the future and execute those plans as best as possible, we cannot ultimately control the outcome of the future. Worry is probably a defense mechanism that we humans have developed as a way of becoming alert to future dangers. Unfortunately, worrying removes us from the present moment, thus destroying our peace of mind.

We all worry, don't we? Some people more so than others. We feel insecure on the job, we fear for our kids' futures, we're concerned about our health and about our ability to pay for our healthcare. We worry about the mortgage, the car payments, and whether or not we will get hung up in traffic. Martha was worried about the many tasks necessary to feed a group of hungry men, wanting the dinner party to be successful. Maybe she was worried that the bread would burn or the vegetable dish would come out mushy. Maybe she was worried that she wouldn't be able to get the meal out on time, thus disappointing her guests. Bottom line is, this posture of worry and anxiety did nothing to advance the making of the meal and caused her to become crabby, complaining, and critical.

Eckart Tolle (a writer who speaks about living in the present moment) says: "85-90% of what we think is pointless or repetitive or both." This includes worrying about the future, projecting possible outcomes of a future that is uncertain. It also includes ruminating about past hurts and disappointments. We can never change the past and so thoughts about the past tend to be pointless, repetitive and possibly painful. Worrying or ruminating is the refusal or inability to remain in the present moment.

The majority of us is afflicted with this kind of compulsive, continuous thinking about the past and the future, a never-ending stream of involuntary thoughts that deplete our joy. For Martha, it was being possessed by compulsive, continuous thinking about getting the meal out on time. And from this anxious posture, she decides to triangulate Jesus: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Triangulation! We all do it when the anxiety within ourselves becomes overwhelming. Triangulation is a form of indirect communication where a person brings in a third party to complain about another person rather than directly communicating with the person with whom she has an issue. An example would be a couple who is

having an argument. Instead of working out the conflict between themselves, the woman calls up her girlfriend and begins complaining about her partner, hoping her friend will take her side. By venting like this, the internal anxiety she feels is then released onto the innocent bystander, hoping that by triangulating, the problem will be solved. This is what Martha expected to happen. However, if she really wanted her problem to be solved, she needed to communicate directly with Mary, not Jesus. Direct communication doesn't always solve a conflict in the way we desire, but it is the best approach to resolve an issue.

For instance, how different might it have turned out if Martha simply gave Mary a glass of wine and whispered in her ear: "How about helping me out in the kitchen after you finish this glass of wine. I am feeling overwhelmed preparing the meal all by myself." But instead, she went to Jesus and said: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Jesus refuses to be triangulated. Instead he supports Mary in her decision to sit and listen and be contemplative. After all contemplation is one of the spiritual disciplines that can lead us into wholeness, inner peace, and a higher level of consciousness. This (I believe) is the wisdom from today's reading.

I know for myself, that if I do not take enough time to engage in prayer, to take part in the reading of Scripture, and to sit quietly in contemplation, then my thoughts and feelings are more apt to become anxious when life throws me a challenge. The mind is a powerful force. How and what we think matters! Every emotion, every action, begins with a thought. Good thoughts bring good emotions, bad thoughts bring bad emotions. The words you mutter to yourself and the thoughts that you dwell on have the power to encourage or discourage, to motivate or deflate, to generate joy or generate sadness. Little by little, the conversations that you hold in the privacy of your mind are determining your destiny. Each thought can move you toward or away from your God-given potential.

Being contemplative helps me remain in the present moment where true peace and joy can be found. Integrating contemplative thinking into my life helps me become more aware of my feelings and thoughts. For instance, if my thoughts cause me to worry about future events, I call them out: "Ah...that thought is about the future and therefore pointless, frightful, and fictional. Just forget it!" If the thought is about a grievance or hurt from the past, I also call it out: "Ah...that thought is past, painful,

pointless, repetitive, and ego-driven. Put it away.” It is actually a good practice! You may want to try becoming more conscious of your own thoughts as you mature on your spiritual journey towards wholeness.

Jesus said: “You are worried and distracted by many things.” (Lk. 10:41-42)
“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (Mt. 6:25-29)

I would like to end this sermon with a poem by Mary Oliver. The title is:

I Worried!

“I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers flow in the right direction, will the earth turn as it was taught, and if not, how shall I correct it? Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven, can I do better? Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows can do it and I am... well, hopeless. Is the eyesight fading or am I just imaging it, am I going to get rheumatism, lockjaw, dementia? Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing. And gave it up. And took my old body and went out into the morning and sang.”