

Learning from Martha and Mary: Choosing the Better Part

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Jesus indicates to Martha and to all of us how to prioritize the better part during the Year of Faith

To all of us in this frenetic era, who feel drawn-and-quartered by seemingly having to do so many things well at once, Jesus, with words shocking to our 21st century sensibilities, presents us today a summary of the Good News. He who came to set the captives free, who is the Truth incarnate, who knows everything and who cannot lie, tells us in one sentence, as he told Martha, the secret to our liberation: "You are worried and distracted by many things. Only one thing is necessary." The crucial question to be answered is, "What is that one thing?"

FALL RIVER, MA (Catholic Online) - One of the most important things in human life is to learn how to set and keep proper priorities.

Often the difference between a happy and unhappy life, between a rewarding and a wasted one, centers on whether we've set the right goals and perseveringly sought to achieve them.

And it is getting harder today for people to set and achieve these priorities. So many of our technological advances, while offering great possibilities to improve our lives, often just leave us torn apart by a list of to-dos that just seems to keep growing, enslaving us to so many tasks that there seems to be no time for the things that deep down we know are most important.

Scores of American men have long complained that, because of all of the demands at work and the fulfillment of other duties, they have less and less time to do the things that are really fulfilling. Even many teenagers and young kids today have to keep a detailed calendar because with lessons, sports, homework, and even play dates, their schedule has become overwhelming.

To make matters more complicated across the generations, technological advances like cell phones, email, texts, Facebook, and Twitter has created a culture of the nanosecond, where those contacting us have gotten so used to an immediate response that we feel we must drop what we're doing and answer right away.

Life has become like the whack-o-mole game that many of us used to play at arcades, where black moles pop up in front of us and we have to whack them down continuously with a mallet. The only difference is that what we're about is not a game

and that the moles are coming up not just in front of us in five or six predictable holes but all around us all the time.

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The crucial question to be answered is, "What is that one thing?"

In the scene from today's Gospel, Jesus reveals the answer in his interaction with the two sisters in Bethany. Martha and Mary welcome Jesus to their home, but they seek to welcome him in two different ways. Martha seeks to please the Lord by doing various things for him. The Gospel doesn't specify what she was doing, but anyone who has hosted a guest knows the types of things that would have characterized her hospitality. She would have been finishing up whatever cleaning might be done, setting up the place to eat, and doubtless preparing a meal.

Yet when Martha similarly spares no effort to welcome God-incarnate with loving attention to detail, and solicits Jesus' authoritative help in persuading her sister Mary to do her fair share of the preparations, Martha receives what at first glance seems to be a mild rebuke.

What Jesus was not saying here was that Martha's efforts were somehow evil or not appreciated. Shortly before he entered their home, Jesus, as we heard yesterday, gave the parable of the Good Samaritan, praising the one who made the effort to take care of another in contrast to those who did nothing.

In several other places in the Gospel he praised service of others: he said that he himself had come among us as one who serves; he washed his disciples' feet at the Last Supper and told them to do the same; he promised to gird himself with an apron and wait on those at the heavenly banquet; and he said that the greatest among us would be the one who serves the rest,

Jesus was clearly not castigating Martha for that service. What he was saying to her, however, was that none of those efforts was strictly-speaking essential. Therefore there was no reason to get worked about them. There was something more important, something that Mary, who had chosen the "better part," realized and that Martha didn't.

Here's what Mary recognized: Jesus had come to their home not to be fed, but to feed. The welcome he sought most was their time, their friendship, their love, their open ears and open hearts. Mary understood this and sat at Jesus' feet listening to him as if nothing in the rest of the world really mattered - because, in fact, Jesus implies, nothing in the rest of the world really does matter anywhere near as much as that.

Jesus once said in a parable, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and

bought it." Jesus was for Mary that pearl of great price more valuable than everything else put together.

Mary showed how much she understood the practical consequences of Jesus' value when he and his apostles visited their home again, just a few days before his death. St. John gives us the scene:

"Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served - some things never change! - and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' . Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me'" (Jn 12:1-8).

The aromatic nard would have cost Mary almost a full year's salary, but she spent it entirely on Jesus because she knew he was worth every ounce of it and more. Jesus was her treasure and worth everything she had. Jesus was the "better part," better than anything or anyone else. He was the one thing necessary.

In these interactions in Bethany with Martha and Mary, Jesus was indicating to them, to the apostles, and to us today the most important priorities of all so that we, too, might choose the better part, by identifying the most important thing of all and then setting our minds and hearts on acting in accordance with that priority.

So let's get practical, especially in this Year of Faith, because each of us wants one day to have Jesus say of us what he said of Mary in today's Gospel. We can ponder three applications.

The first is to our hospitality toward Jesus. Like the sisters of Bethany, each of us is called to welcome Christ into our homes, both our physical homes and the spiritual abode of our hearts and souls. Do we welcome Jesus and sit at his feet in prayer? Do we have a time and a place where we pray regularly and say yes to him and no to the series finale of TV drama or to a playoff baseball game? Christ knocks on the doors of each of our hearts and homes wanting to come on in, but how often and how much do we invite him in?

One of the great family prayers - which the Church focuses on in particular in October - is the Rosary, when we, together with Jesus' mother Mary, ponder all Jesus teaches us in 20 of the most important mysteries of his life and the life of the Church. We can likewise sit and listen to him speak to us in Sacred Scripture, knowing that to listen to God give us the Good News each day is so much more important than reading or listening to the bad news that normally covers the front page of the daily paper or evening newscast.

The question is whether we, like Martha, are too caught up, anxious, and distracted by so many other less important things that we're welcoming into our minds and souls

each day that we no longer have the energy or space to invite in Christ. It's Christ, however, who ought to be invited in first. That leads to the second point.

We're called to imitate Mary in choosing the better part and truly allowing Jesus to feed us as he desires to do. It's not enough for us to know what our priority should be. We also have to choose it. It's not enough just to know where the treasure is buried, we need to make the choice to sell off other things that own us so that we can buy the field. That means reorienting our life to make Jesus truly its center.

One of the most common problems facing many even faithful Catholics today, and preventing their spiritual growth, is that they put many things ahead of God, on Sunday, on Monday and throughout the week. I like to call this mixed up set of priorities the "Jesus is an important part of my life" syndrome. They try to squeeze Jesus into their schedule if they still have room and are not exhausted after having completed all the other activities they believe they "have to" do, whereas what we're supposed to be doing is making God truly the God of our life, giving him first place, and then centering all the rest we do around our relationship with him.

Those who center their life around Jesus will have a totally different attitude toward Eucharistic adoration, to daily Mass, and to adult education opportunities where Jesus seeks to feed us than those who are just trying to fit him in, as if Jesus is just one more important person or duty in a long series. To choose Jesus as the best part of all was Mary of Bethany's great wisdom and we will be wiser the more we imitate her.

The last application is to Martha. Martha often gets a bad rap in Church history in comparison to her sister because many interpret what Jesus did as a spiritual smack down, somehow denigrating the loving service Martha was doing for him in the kitchen.

Jesus wasn't at all minimizing the importance of what Martha was doing but was focusing on how she was doing it. The last thing Jesus would want would be for all of us merely to sit at his feet and allow everyone else to work to serve us. That's certainly not the Christian way or the way Jesus adopted.

Like Martha, we are called to work hard serving others but we're supposed to do it with the spirit of Mary. That's what the sanctification of our work is all about, to have Martha's hands and Mary's contemplative heart, so that we won't be distracted by many other things, but so focused on Jesus in work, at school and in family life that we'll be getting fed by him in action so that we might feed others not just by our work but with the One working within us. That's the vocation of every Christian.

And one of the most important forms of service we can give to others is to help them to form the true priorities that will bring them to happiness, holiness and heaven. Jesus wants to send us as missionaries to show them by our witness and words how to choose the better part, how happily to make God the true priority of one's life, in the midst of so many modern distractions and anxieties that leave people without a sure compass and spinning out of control. Each of us is called to work as hard as Martha, out of love for God and others, in setting an eloquent, attractive example like Mary, the example of a life with Jesus at the center.

Today, we, too, like Mary, have listened at Jesus' feet while he has fed us with his word. We ask him likewise to give us the courage to reorder the priorities of our life, and to base our lives on what he has reminded us today. Jesus is the one thing necessary. Mary chose the better part. Now let us ask her to intercede for us from before Jesus' feet in heaven for the grace to make the same choice today, tomorrow and each day going forward.

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