

**Year C: Proper 11 Amos 8:1-12; Ps 52; Col 1:15-28; Lk 10:38-42
St. Barnabas, St. Louis – July 21, 2019**

Focus Sentence: Mary and Martha are BOTH important facets of our personalities.

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I'd like to propose a *contemplative* model to you this morning. If you're at all familiar with the spiritual practice known as Centering Prayer, you'll know that it's a very gentle, sort of passive, approach to developing a deeper relationship with God. It involves sitting quietly, letting go of distracting thoughts, simply BEING in the presence of God, opening ourselves to the Spirit of God, and discovering our "true selves" in ever deeper and deeper places within ourselves.

Now, let's look at another model for a moment, a model of the ACTIVE LIFE. We've probably all known some GREAT hostesses at one time or another. Women (usually) who are proud of their skills, and from whose kitchens suppers are wonders to behold. These hostesses never sit; they hover. Plates are never allowed to go empty; guests are constantly asked if they need or want anything.

PAUSE

We could also look at more contrasting pairs of models: the philosophical vs. social activist; the typeA/typeB personalities; the right brain/left brain dominant people; or "people-persons" vs. "idea persons." Always a contrast, and I'm guessing that we could all probably place ourselves in one camp or the other in each of these pairs of models.

And that seems to be exactly what happens in the minds of most of us when we listen to this passage from Luke's Gospel. Are we Mary or are we Martha?

Are we the attentive, contemplative listener, passive at the feet of Jesus, growing in wisdom and grace? Or are we the attentive host, actively providing for every need of Jesus and the other guests?

PAUSE

A cursory reading of this passage from Luke might lead one to say that those of us identifying with Mary are somehow the “better” folks. After all, even Jesus tells Martha that Mary “has chosen the better part.” Jesus *seems* to be saying, “Forget all that kitchen stuff and come over here; sit down with Mary.” And, reflecting back on last week’s Gospel reading --- the lawyer’s *neighbor* question leading to the Parable of the Good Samaritan --- we might even look at this contrast between Mary and Martha as a different slant on the double commandment: loving God would seem to be a *whole* lot more important than “only” loving your neighbor!

PAUSE

Of course, if this way of thinking leads us to throw out what’s called the “ministry of hospitality,” then we’ll have no more parish suppers in our churches, no more receptions for Bishop’s visitations or new confirmands. No more ushers or greeters to welcome visitors to our churches. Maybe even no more Eucharists because the Eucharist is really a meal. And how *would* we welcome strangers? In today’s Hebrew Bible reading we heard the Genesis story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming the three strangers by the oaks of Mamre. In that story, Abraham and Sarah extended Martha-like hospitality to strangers/travelers who (they later found out) were actually angels, ambassadors from God.

And in today’s Gospel, Luke does tell us specifically that it was Martha who welcomed Jesus into the sisters’ home.

PAUSE

So what’s the problem here with the “ministry of hospitality?” Why do we have Jesus saying that Mary has chosen the “better part?”

Well, look for a moment at what's going on here; look at the dynamics of the situation: Luke says that Martha was DISTRACTED by her hostess work. Martha even goes so far as to try and get Jesus to play parent --- "Tell Mary to help me in the kitchen!" Hospitality **VS.** quiet listening isn't the problem – it's the distraction, the upset priorities --- **they're** really the problem.

PAUSE

Indeed, hospitality is certainly necessary, even VITAL --- and not just in parish life. And not just because of the food --- how much and how it's served isn't that important. Because a little wine and a bit of unleavened bread are just fine!

No, what truly brings us together is the WORD. During Abraham and Sarah's picnic at Mamre, or around that table in Bethany, God's *word* is shared. Those traveling strangers (who we now know are actually angels) bring a critical message: God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. And at that other dinner, Jesus shares the promise of God with Mary: the lowly will be lifted up, the dead will be raised, the blind will see, and the hopeless will be given hope.

What Martha forgets is that true hospitality (any outreach activity, really) focuses on the needs of the GUESTS, and not on the preferences of the HOST. And I suspect that what Jesus (frazzled from his own busy ministry) needs most here in Bethany is some quiet sharing with these two --- forget the good china and the silver and the stuffed mushrooms that're starting to burn.

PAUSE

I think, too, that once again, we're faced with that message we've surely heard before; in the end, it's not "either/or"; it's "both/and." What we really need is **balance** in our lives. **BOTH** quiet listening and prayer in the presence of Jesus, **AND** true hospitality and action. For the true hospitality and outreach of the Gospel will not allow people to starve --- physically **OR** spiritually. Or as the Jesuits like to say, we need to be *contemplatives in action*.

In a few moments, we'll be baptizing _____ and welcoming _____ into the Body of Christ. We'll join in renewing our own Baptismal promises, and you'll note that we again find "both/and," in the words of those promises. We'll promise **BOTH** to "continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers" **AND** we'll promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves."

We need them both; one won't work without the other.

I think that's a message to keep in mind as we either begin today, or continue, to grow in the Christian life, and as we entertain our *own* angels unawares.

AMEN