

Pentecost 8C
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Finding Balance

In our Gospel story this morning Jesus decides to pause from his journey to Jerusalem and to drop in on his good friends. The home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus is a safe place for Jesus. This is a home he has visited many times and these are the kind of friends with whom Jesus feels totally at ease. Martha's first inclination is to get into the kitchen and begin preparing a fine meal for her guest. While Martha is being a good hostess, skimming through cookbooks, chopping vegetables and stirring pots, her sister is in the other room. Mary is in no hurry to help out. Instead, she settles down right in front of Jesus. Incidentally, Mary's posture is the typical one of a disciple-sitting at the feet of her teacher. Mary doesn't want to be preoccupied in the kitchen. She wants to spend whatever time she has with Jesus, her friend, her teacher, her Lord.

Martha's not too happy with her sister for shirking her duties. I can see her now, marching out of the kitchen straight towards Jesus, her hands on her hips and her eyes fixed on Mary. "Do you not care, she says to Jesus? Do you not care that I'm slaving away in the kitchen while my sister won't even lift a finger? Do something about it!" Jesus responds with compassion. "Martha, my dear friend, you are worried and distracted by too many things. You've worked yourself into such a state." With gentleness and patience Jesus tries to calm her down and urges her to let go of her preoccupations.

This passage has often been interpreted as affirming the quiet or contemplative way of life or the life of prayer over the active way of life or the life of service. Mary has chosen the better way, we hear in this story. However, the word which we hear as *better* is in fact translated from the Greek as *good*. Mary has chosen

the *good* part. Martha's practice of hospitality, her work and service are good, as well. What Jesus recognizes is that she has allowed her work to so distract and preoccupy her time that she has left no time to listen and be open to his life-giving words, as Mary has. Our former Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold, offers these insights, "Martha and Mary are both part of the same essential Christian experience. Martha and Mary live within each one of us. Here are the two sisters, who aren't simply two different personalities; they are two dimensions of ourselves. Using more modern vocabulary, you might say they represent extroversion-focus on the world -and introversion-focus on the inner world. We need to embrace both realities within ourselves. We need to be both busy and engaged, but at times, we also need to be passive and receptive as God invites us both to action and to contemplation, not as separate states or activities, but as two much loved sisters who need each other and live together in one reality."

It is not an either/or message we hear in this story, but rather a both/and message. This passage teaches us about the importance of finding balance in our lives. I imagine that most of us live our lives out of balance. And more often than not we feel it is out of necessity. We run around breathless, from one task to another and then yet to another. We have very good reasons for doing so: obligations to work, family, children, obligations to our church and to our friends or out in our community-all important and all meaningful. Our weeks are filled up fast with many things, and then our minds and hearts can overflow with worry and distraction, like Martha.

Even our culture can lure us into taking on more distractions. I read a commentary during the week on this Gospel story in which the writer was reminded of an op-ed piece he had read years ago in *The New York Times*. The piece was entitled, "The Taxi Driver." "The columnist told of being driven by cab from Charles De Gaulle Airport to Paris. During the one hour trip, he and the driver had done six things: the driver had driven the cab, talked on his cell phone

and watched a video (which was a little nerve-racking!), whereas he had been riding, working on a column on his laptop and listening to his iPOD. “There was only one thing we never did,” the columnist wrote, “we never talked to each other.” Sound familiar? How easily can we become distracted by the many things in our lives, electronic or otherwise, which keep us from paying attention to the other in our midst.

Henri Nouwen once commented that our lives, while full, are often unfulfilled. “Our occupations and preoccupations,” he said, “fill our external and internal lives to the brim. They prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives.” Breathing in and breathing out. Receiving and giving. Being available to God’s Spirit and then again engaged in service to the world. This is the pattern- the rhythm of life which leads to the wholeness and fulfillment Jesus has to offer. This is the kind of balanced life he invites us to embrace.

“Take a deep breath,” Jesus says to the Martha in all of us. “I see that you’re weary and distracted. Stop just for a minute and come and sit here with me. Give yourself a well deserved break. There will be plenty of time for you to finish your work. I promise.” *Amen.*