

## “MARY AND MARTHA”

**Reading: Luke 10:38-42**

LET ME BEGIN this morning by saying that I have a great deal of sympathy for Martha’s situation. Here she is, slaving away all day in a hot kitchen, and then when the guests arrive, she gets told she should be spending more time on “spiritual” pursuits. The restraint she shows is nothing short of remarkable. If I were her, I don’t know who I would be madder at—Mary or Jesus. To my way of thinking, it’s a miracle they both didn’t end up with shish kebab all over their face!

Nevertheless, the point of the story has less to do with manners, than it has to do with setting priorities. No one can serve two masters. Either you can be busy with serving, or you can be attentive to Jesus’ words. You cannot be both. Or can you? At any rate, the writer of Luke makes it clear that his preference is not for the person of action, Martha, but rather for the person of contemplation, Mary.

Actually this is a re-run of a theme that first appeared in the Book of Genesis. Remember the story about Jacob and Esau? They were Isaac and Rebekah’s kids. Although they were twins, they were as different from one another as night and day. Esau grew up to become a “skillful hunter, a man of the field,” while Jacob was a “quiet man, dwelling in tents.”

Again, the clear-cut biblical preference is for the quiet guy, Jacob. Esau is made out to look like a greedy, impetuous fool. Jacob comes off looking heady and wise and he ends up with all the goodies to prove it. As a result, it’s Jacob, not Esau, who’s been immortalized in the scriptures; this is spit of the fact that Esau’s personality probably has more to commend itself to than does Jacob’s.

In other words, the Bible has long had a bias in favor of the Jacob’s and Mary’s of this world. Me, I’m not so sure. I’m still not convinced that being the

quiet, reflective type guarantees you of being any more religious. I know it doesn't guarantee you of being any more fun.

And who says Christianity shouldn't be fun? In my opinion we already have too many tight-lipped, grim-faced Christians running around here as it is. I'll take an Esau over a Jacob in church any day.

Not long ago I was talking to a young woman who told me that she was in love with two men and couldn't make up her mind which one she wanted to marry. The first one was charming, witty and consistently good company, but not too reliable in a crisis. The second one was a little on the dull side, but was like the Rock of Gibraltar. I heard myself say to her: "Look, how often are you going to be in a crisis?"

Now my point is this: the biblical preference undoubtedly would be for the dull-sided, Rock of Gibraltar type. But why? Why not choose the other guy? Proverbs 22:17 states, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones." Well, who wants to be known as Mrs. Dry Bones? If you can learn to handle the crisis yourself, why not marry someone who can at least keep you entertained?

The truth is that neither Mary nor Martha's position seems entirely satisfactory to me. Let's look at Martha's situation for a moment. No doubt we've all known someone like her in church at one time or another. She may not get a lot out of the sermons, but then again, who does? Nevertheless, she's always the first one in line to volunteer to put on a church supper. If someone is sick and needs to be called on, you can count on her. She's quick to write a letter to her congressperson over some cause or social issue. The coffee hour is probably just as important to her as is the sermon or the pastoral prayer. And who's to say that she's wrong?

The fact is people go to church for different reasons. When he was young, Harry Golden once asked his father, "If you don't believe in God, why do you go to the synagogue so regularly?" His father replied, "Jews go to synagogue for all

sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkle, who is Orthodox, goes to talk to God. I go to talk to Garfinkle.”

I can't be sure, but I suspect we Christians are not much different from Jews in that regard. We go to church for a variety of reasons. To be sure, the notion of God is somehow in back of everything, but the truth is some of us go to pray, some of us go to sing, and some of us just go to be around other people. Sometimes it may even be a matter of all three. But in any case it hardly seems right to create a kind of spiritual pecking order within the church. Who is to say who has chosen the “good portion” and who has not? Hasidic Jews have long had a saying: “Eating can be holier than fasting.” Their point is well taken. We all know people whose personal piety may well be exemplary—in public—but whose real spiritual life, in private, leaves much to be desired. It all depends upon the spirit in which it is taken.

Yet there's another side to all this, to be sure. Sometimes we can become so over-involved in the life of the church that we forget what the whole thing is all about. Moreover, we live in age when it's easy to be busy.

The poet Shelley once gave the following description of his time schedule: “I study Portuguese while shaving. I translate Spanish for an hour before breakfast. I read all forenoon and write all afternoon; every minute of the day is filled with something.” To which an old Quaker woman said to him, “Friend, when does thee do any thinking?”

That is an apt description of the way too many of us lead our lives. Every minute of the day is filled with something. There's no room for God to enter in. The mystics often talk of what they call a “wilderness experience”—an experience of solitude. Thomas Merton once said, “Alas, in America there's no wilderness, only dude ranches.” What he was getting at is this: Americans are afraid of being alone for fear of having to pay a call on themselves and finding no one at home! But imagine finding at home not only yourself, but God and Jesus too. Wouldn't that take care of just about everything from a clear direction for your life to the best possible company along the way?

But too much contemplation isn't any good either. The Middle Ages showed us that. Real religion should help us deal with the reality of life—not help us escape from it. When Karl Marx called religion the “opium of the people” he was at least partly right. Religion can be used as an escape, and often is, by people who can't cope with the reality of life's rigors and responsibilities. This is what prompted Karl Barth to say, “Sometimes the church can become our final hiding place from God.”

Don't get me wrong. Mary's attitude is commendable. But if taken to the extreme her approach can end up in privatism; a religion that seeks to make the spiritual life a private little affair between the practitioner and her maker, with little or no regard for the rest of the world or the worshipping community.

It seems to me that there's a time to pray and time not to pray. There's a time to reflect and a time to react. There's a time to be like Mary and a time to be like Martha. For as Dorothy Sayers once said, “To pray when one ought to be working, can be just as much a sin as working when one ought to be praying.”

Today's Gospel lesson also seems to speak a special word in regard to the debate between the social Gospel and the personal Gospel. In reality of course, there are not two, but only one Gospel. The true Christian life begins in contemplation but culminates in action, in mission, in making the spirit of the thing come alive. As the writer of First John pointed out, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his neighbor, he is a liar; for anyone who does not love his neighbor whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (I John 4:20).

The correct ingredients then, for the making of the proper spiritual life, seems to be to take a measure of Martha, add it to a measure of Mary, and stir it together until the finished product becomes something resembling the kind of life that Jesus himself seems to have lived. No one was ever anymore involved with people, or with the affairs of his day, than he was. But by the same token, nobody was as acutely aware of the need to get away for meditation, reflection, and prayer. He viewed his spiritual life, not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to further the ministry and mission of God's kingdom.

So it was with him, my dear friends, so it must also be with us. “There is need of only one thing”—namely, communion with God and loving service to our fellow men and women.

The church needs both Mary and Martha, if it is going to fulfill its high calling of teaching the world to love the Lord with all our heart and mind, as well as our neighbor as ourselves. To choose one at the expense of the other, could well jeopardize not only our own spiritual growth, but also that of the entire world as well.

Let us pray: Lord, let us neither be distracted by too much serving nor paralyzed by a lack of action, but through continued reliance upon your goodness and mercy, help us to go forth into a troubled and uncertain world, eager to do your bidding and committed to do your will. Amen.

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