

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ Year C  
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## “How Things Change When One Meets Jesus”

- I. Introduction: The Meeting. Today we join two familiar Biblical characters, Mary and Martha, as they welcome Jesus into their home. There was a bit of drama going on during this visit. Mary was listening to Jesus teach, while Martha was preparing a large meal. Martha was frustrated by what she saw as Mary’s irresponsibility. So she complained to Jesus. But Jesus’ response surprised her. He didn’t join Martha in criticizing Mary. Instead he focused on her: “Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things . . . there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.” It was not the response that Martha hoped for.
- II. Why is this brief story in the Gospel? Scholars believe that Luke intentionally placed the story of Martha and Mary immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Both stories have to do with worry and distraction. You may remember that the priest and the Levite were distracted by their own pressing business and therefore did not perceive the opportunity to care for the wounded traveler. Many Lukan scholars believe that both stories were designed to shift our focus away from ourselves onto the presence of Jesus Christ and to help us better understand what it means to be one of his disciples.
- III. Meeting becomes an encounter. At the heart of today’s gospel is the question: “Are we putting ourselves intentionally in the presence of Jesus Christ, and are we opening ourselves to what He is teaching us there and then doing what he is calling us to do?” This is what Jesus meant by “choosing the better part.” That means that we have to let go of our distractions, of what stands in the way of our hearing Jesus. For Martha, that meant her worrying and judgmentalism. Her sense of duty was strong, and she was burdened.

The original Greek in Luke describes Jesus teaching Mary his WORD, that is, the content of his message. They were not engaging in social conversation. Jesus was leading Mary into a deeper understanding of what it meant to follow Him. Perhaps he was teaching her Torah. The fact that he was teaching Mary was, in and of itself, a radical thing. In Jesus’ time, it was forbidden to teach Torah to girls and women. In an expression of the day, the rabbis said, “It is better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman.” Jesus’ actions were an expression of how much Jesus valued Mary.

With this story in mind, let me share an example from my own experience, one that involves our friends Martha and Mary. In 1999, Peg and I took a vacation on Fripp Island, South Carolina. We often use vacation time to catch up with one another and to reflect together about what is going on in our lives. One part of this reflection is jointly reading Scripture and meditation books and praying together. During this vacation we each were preoccupied with what the future would be. I was finishing seminary, and everyone was asking what our plans would be. I was Associate Dean of the

Graduate School of Social Service at Fordham University in New York City and beginning to think, actually to be led, to know that my prior plan to be a “worker priest,” i.e., to stay at the University and serve as a priest on the weekends, was not what God wanted. Peg had for a time also had been feeling led to make changes with regard to her professional work. It was clear to both of us that we were entering an “in-between time.” The good folks of Ascension know about such “in-between times”! Those are the times you yearn for closure, but it’s not yet clear.

One morning we were talking about the decisions to be made, our questions, and our worries. We wondered what God was calling us to. There might be a need to re-locate. How would that affect us? We found ourselves frustrated with all the unknowns. As we ended our discussion we read together from one of Henri Nowen’s works in which he wrote about his anxiety and his own struggle with wanting to know about and be able to control his future. As many of you know, Nowen was a gifted writer and teacher who gave up tenure at both Harvard and Yale and spent years working with persons with severe developmental disabilities.

A second part of our reading that morning was the story of Martha and Mary. At first I reacted in my usual way “Let’s not beat up on Martha. She is the worker! And worrying, after all, is just normal when you are trying to make everything go well.” Then it occurred to me – Jesus was teaching Martha as well as teaching Mary! He was teaching Martha that worrying is hurtful: it harms us, it burdens us, and it distances us from Christ. As we worry, we begin to feel more responsible; we often become annoyed with others for what they are not doing. We also tend to become more judgmental of others. And we often become less willing to allow God to be in charge. Jesus was telling Martha this not to criticize her, but to help her let go of the worrying, enter into his presence, and reach for the “better part.”

Talk about a new understanding! I grew up in a family of worriers. When taking action, you often worry. Sometimes you worry a lot, because if you don’t worry you might be caught off guard. I had been taught from a very early age to worry. So I have struggled with worrying as a spiritual issue throughout my life – often worrying about things that I cannot change and perhaps are not even mine to decide. I know that my worrying can lead me to try to act when I should wait, or to try to force situations to closure that aren’t yet ready for resolution.

- IV. **Spiritual Learning.** What happened on the beach that summer morning has occurred over and over in my spiritual life. If I am willing to slow down, let the distractions go, and sit at the feet of Jesus in quiet expectation, I will be taught what I need to know. Conversely, if I stay in my own space of activity and worry, it’s much more difficult for me to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. Many of us struggle with this choice – letting our distractions and worries drive us into trying to “figure it out” and “make it happen” rather than opening ourselves to the immediate presence of Jesus Christ and letting him teach us about what comes next. When I can remember and live out of a faithful place of quiet expectation, God handles the outcome.

I am grateful to Martha for that spiritual lesson. Left to my own devices I am Martha. With God’s help, I can also be Mary. What happened after the summer of 1999? We went back to Manhattan, I finished seminary, and within the next six months it became clear to me that I was being called to leave the University and become a full-time priest. I sat at Jesus’ feet and knew that was what he

wanted me to do. For months after we had given up one thing, we did not know where we would go next. It has often been that way for me in my spiritual life. God has asked me to be faithful and take risks without knowing the specifics of the future. I interviewed at a number of parishes from Atlanta to Connecticut, received several offers, but didn't feel led to accept them. One week before having to respond to a call to one of these parishes, I was approached about going to St. Thaddeus in Aiken, SC. Three days later Peg and I flew there, and before returning to New Jersey we both felt God's call to that place. We sold our home within a month and moved south. When the Holy Spirit speaks, if we listen and respond, movement often takes place rapidly. We both experienced a time of deep learning about the numerous ways in which God provides for us when we sit at Jesus' feet and listen. It is the "better part." As followers of Jesus Christ we really don't need to worry. God is in charge of what will happen. God will direct us where to go, and God will help us find the pieces and fit them together. God will provide, and provide abundantly, if we choose the better part.

- V. Conclusion. Here we all are at Ascension, and Jesus has come to our house. We're happy to see him, really happy, but, like Martha we could get busy and distracted. We could put on a wonderful dinner in his honor that would take all our energy. Or we could sit at his feet, go into his presence, and focus on him. Does that mean we'll not be active? No, Jesus is not telling us to be inactive or passive! He is telling us not to be so busy that we lose sight of being in his presence and lose sight of what we have yet to learn from him as his disciples.

Is he calling us to start a Stephen Ministry Program and to ask parishioners to be in discernment about being called to minister to others through this ministry? Absolutely. Is he calling us to develop and participate in newly invigorated Christian Education and youth ministry programs? You bet. Is he calling us to explore beginning a Daughters of the King chapter here and to offer a third Sunday service, a contemporary service? I believe that he is. Caring for one another, teaching, prayer, and worship are what we do. The Holy Spirit has been speaking to many among us about these ministries. I believe that when we sit at Jesus' feet, we often hear his clear call to take specific steps, to take action. However, unless we are sitting at Jesus' feet and learning from him, our activities can become self-directed rather than directed by him. We are, each one of us, being asked to choose the "better part:" to sit with Jesus, to listen to him, and to ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand what he is calling us to do as his disciples. Amen.