

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

When Jesus decided to drop by Martha and Mary's home, Martha's reaction of going into the kitchen to prepare a meal and cater to their guests was expected. In doing this, she was being faithful to the tradition of hospitality, which was modeled by Abraham when he welcomed his guests to his tent. Just as Abraham turned to Sarah to assist with the duties of hospitality, Martha expected Mary to assist her. Mary's action of plopping down at the feet of Jesus must have infuriated Martha.

As Martha fervently worked alone in the kitchen to prepare food for their guests, the frustration was building. I bet that before she said a word that her frustration was heard through the clanking of pots and pans, the loud sighs, the mumbling to herself, or the loud closing of a cupboard door.

Martha reminds me of my beloved mother-in-law. When my wife, Kim, and I would stay at my in-law's house, my mother-in-law wanted to make sure that I felt comfortable and well fed, but she always expected Kim to help her in the kitchen. That was her tradition growing up in a small farming community. Even when we didn't have any plans for the day, if Kim was not in the kitchen by 7am, like an alarm clock, the

sound of pots and pans clanking and the cupboard doors closing would emanate throughout the house.

Jesus knew what was going on with Martha before she approached him, but he waited until she verbally expressed her displeasure about the situation. Martha's statement of, "Lord, do you not care...", is bold, as Jesus is the guest, and it's as if she is blaming Jesus for her situation. If Jesus did care, he probably would have asked Mary to help Martha, but he didn't. It's likely that simple refreshments would have been sufficient and having Martha at his feet with Mary would have been his preference. After all, Jesus came to serve rather than to be served.

Martha's worry and distraction of many things was keeping her from seeing the one thing...the better part. Her distraction was clouding her view of the intent of her hospitality. After all, hospitality is offered to honor the guest, but if you are focused on the things to be done for the guest, rather than the needs of the guest, how is that hospitality?

This gospel story is not necessarily about affirming the contemplative life over the active life...it's not that simple. What we hear in the reading as, "Mary has chosen the better part...", is not the best translation. It really should say that Mary has chosen the "good," which

is more accurate to the original Greek. In this meaning, Jesus is saying that Mary has chosen the connection to God, who is good. Even though Mary has chosen the good, there is still a need for the active work that Martha shows. If we focus on the good and building our relationship with God, then this gives us the clarity, and sustainability, to go out and work in service, charity, justice, mercy and peace. The story is not about either / or, it's a both / and.

Early on in my formation as a deacon, I read a story about a deacon who lost his direction and identity. For the first 15 years of ministry, he had the same pastor, and he led the parish's RCIA program, baptism preparation, and marriage preparation. He had a very full ministerial life. When the news came that his pastor, and friend, was to be reassigned, he was sad to see his friend go, but he knew that this was an inevitable event.

When the new pastor arrived, he seemed like a nice guy, and the deacon felt that he was going to get along with the pastor just fine. However, after a few months, the pastor approached the deacon and let him know that he was going to make a few changes. Instead of the deacon leading RCIA, baptism and marriage preparations, he wanted him to take on different ministries. The pastor asked the him to visit people in the local

retirement homes and hospitals. The deacon was not expecting this change, but he accepted the pastor's decision and request.

He found that this new ministerial load was a much lighter than his previous role, and now, he was struggling with his identity. He was having a crisis of faith. At the urging of a friend, the deacon attended a spiritual retreat. It was during this retreat that he realized that his struggle was more about his relationship with God than the change in his ministerial work. You see, he had been so wrapped up in the work of his ministry that he forgot to maintain his relationship with God. He fooled himself into thinking that the busyness of the ministry was also sustaining his relationship with God, but it had the opposite effect. He had really regressed to the point where his identity was his ministry, instead of God.

Whether working in ministry, focusing on our careers, raising our family, or being socially active with our friends, while these are all good things and make up part of who we are, they are not our identity. We find our true identity within our relationship with God.

Let us pray:

Dear Heavenly Father. You are all good and loving, always showering upon us your grace of love and peace. Strengthen us to open our hearts to hear your voice, allowing us to follow your will for us. Help us to not be distracted by the things of this world that are not eternal and let us come to the feet of Christ to be strengthen by your Word. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.