

Listening to Learn

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Today's Gospel passage is problematic for activists. The normal interpretation is that since Jesus said, 'Mary has chosen the better part,' Jesus favors contemplation over action. For those who are actively trying to change society and serve others like Martha, this can appear insulting and dismissive of their work. When activism is done properly, however, there is actually no conflict between action and contemplation, Martha and Mary. This is because trained activists know that their work always starts with listening. Before undertaking a project to change structures, they spend many hours meeting with people, listening to their stories, and taking notes on what they have heard. They always begin like Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus listening. It is only when activists forget this first step of listening that they experience their work as burdensome and become anxious, like Martha in today's Gospel.

Whether or not we consider ourselves activists, all of us can learn the importance of listening. Whenever we listen, we discover new insights, find connecting points, develop relationships with others, and hear the voices of those who have been silenced or feel unheard. Listening attentively to as many voices as possible is an essential prerequisite for doing justice, leading others, or simply formulating our own thoughts about important matters. We cannot be Martha without first being Mary; we cannot serve without first being able to listen.

Truth be told, the ability to listen is becoming more and more uncommon in our world today, including in our churches. So many of us listen in order to confirm our own biases rather than listen in order to learn. That is not really listening! The author and psychiatrist M. Scott Peck,

who spent most of his life listening to his clients in his practice, had a great tool for helping him listen in order to learn. He called it 'bracketing.' Just as brackets are used in writing to enclose a thought, he said that we need to bracket ourselves whenever we listen to others. Bracketing, he explains in his book *The Road Less Travelled*, is a way to gain "new knowledge and greater understanding by temporarily giving up one's self- putting oneself aside, so to speak- so as to make room for the incorporation of new material into the self." (73) In other words, bracketing allows us to contain ourselves, our thoughts, our ideas, our reactions, and our judgments for the moment so that we can take in all that the other person is saying. We don't even have to agree with them. When we do this, we will truly hear their words and also their underlying fears, hopes, dreams, and intentions, all of which are valuable material. Of course, there will be a time for us to unbracket ourselves and analyze what we have heard, but bracketing prevents us from jumping into that stage too quickly.

All of our actions for serving others must start with a period of 'listening to learn,' like Mary at the feet of Jesus. Do I listen to confirm my own bias or to learn? Have I interrupted others who were trying to speak when I should have been listening? How can we as a Church, following the synodal path of Pope Francis, bracket ourselves so that we can listen attentively and respectfully to one another?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that we may be both Martha and Mary. May we serve others like Martha, but first serve them by listening to learn, like Mary.