

One day years ago, Pastor Norm and I were discussing the story of Mary and Martha. The question was:

Which sister did the "right" thing?

Norm confidently concluded that Mary had made the wiser choice,
for wouldn't we all want to take advantage of being able to spend
one-on-one time at Jesus' feet, and learn from him?

I had to agree;

but I also understood the complexities of preparing for a dinner party!

A few months later, our church hosted a joint meeting between Santa Fe and Sierra Blanca Presbyteries. The meeting was electrically charged
with big political decisions regarding our future:
whether we should join as one presbytery or remain separate;
and opinions were divided.

Santa Fe Presbytery was bringing a Greyhound bus along with many cars and vans,
and we expected a large attendance.

Our whole church was involved in the preparation!

We gathered registrars and greeters;

we planned hospitality, meals, snacks, and after-dinner entertainment;
and preachers and musicians for two worship services,

all to be accomplished between Friday afternoon and lunch on Saturday.

On the day of the meeting, this church was buzzing with activity --

I was in the office helping with last-minute details,
and suddenly Norm rushed in with a frantic, preoccupied look on his face.

He took a fresh water bottle in his hand, opened it, and turning it upside down,
drained it in one huge gulp! He hadn't even had time to drink water!
As he finished and heaved a sigh, I couldn't help but ask,
"What do you think of Mary and Martha now?"
He burst out laughing as he realized that being the host had suddenly become
overwhelming -- and he was now in Martha's shoes! //

Martha has joyfully invited Jesus to her home. Jesus is a close friend of the
family, and she knows well the importance of Jesus' ministry and his
influence among the people. Like any of us would be,
she is honored that he will share in a meal that she has prepared,
and she sets out to make it one he will remember!

Pots and pans begin flying in the kitchen; vegetables are gathered; grain is ground;
bread is made - the table needs to be set -- I'm sure you can imagine!

. . . . And then, there is Mary: perfectly content,
gazing quietly into Jesus' face as he talks with her,
perhaps telling her about his ministry and mission to the *Gentiles*,
the lowly and the outcasts. . . Mary is in heaven!
. . . Meanwhile, Martha is sweating in the hot kitchen.

I must confess, I feel Martha's frustration!

For if Jesus ever came to dinner at my house,
I am sure I would want to be the best hostess he had ever encountered!
The self-expectations would be very great! Yet,
seeking perfection can become a distracted purpose
that is centered on a selfish desire to "outdo oneself" for the guest.
Jesus does not expect this!

This story is told just after Jesus has commissioned the 72 disciples to become apostles in his name.

Jesus gives the new apostles a lesson in manners for their home visits
as they travel to new communities
and to those who may not have heard the good news,
or who do not want to hear it.

These days are not easy for the apostles, for
they are singing a new song in a strange land.

Jesus tells the apostles to assess their level of welcome in the community,
to be sure that the villagers are friendly.

They are not to be an imposition on their hosts, and are to accept the meals that
are offered, without judgment of the cook. Jesus tells them,
"Eat what they set before you."

Although many women in the OT were deemed worthy of respect,
the rabbinic culture of the NT had changed women's status to an inferior one.
To counter this, Jesus deliberately shapes his teachings in order to communicate
his message just as powerfully to women as to men.
Jesus elevates and affirms the status of women as his disciples.
Mary is therefore just as welcome as a man to sit with Jesus
and hear his teaching.

Martha leaves Jesus and goes into the kitchen to prepare the meal . . .
As she realizes that Mary isn't coming into the kitchen to help,
she probably begins banging the pots more loudly as a hint to Mary . . .

Finally, she returns to Jesus to complain about Mary's lack of help.
"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?
Tell her, then, to help me!" she pleads.
Jesus' words, "Martha, Martha!" indicate that she is overdoing her efforts as
hostess and that he would gratefully accept a simple, one-course meal.

He would enjoy teaching her at his knee, too!

Even though Martha's efforts are to be praised, they are not faultless.

Martha believes she is doing the better thing, so she criticizes her sister. In the cultural context of biblical Palestine, she may even believe that Mary has no place as a disciple, that it would be a disgrace to the family if Mary decided to follow Jesus along with the men.

Since Martha is determined to interrupt Mary's moment with Jesus, she places her honored guest in the very middle of the squabble by asking him to reprimand Mary. Instead, Jesus gently reprimands Martha while honoring Mary's rapt attention to him.

Jesus makes it plain: Only one thing is necessary: **to listen to his teaching**. The rest is optional.

Martha has neglected the most important aspect of dinner with Jesus: **his presence**. She has let her self-expectations dominate.

Mary recognizes the **importance of the guest**; Martha's mind is governed by a tradition to **serve the guest**. But her ultimate failure is in her unwillingness to serve her sister along with Jesus.

In these two sisters, Jesus juxtaposes the traditional role of women -- that of supporter of Jesus and his disciples, and an emerging, non-traditional role -- that of disciple.

A meal had great historical and symbolic importance in the biblical world. Food functioned as a metaphor for the Word of God:

- To feed good food was to bless, to bestow life upon another;
- To feed bad food was to judge or punish, or hand out death.
- To eat together joined people with the Lord in unity, covenant, and belonging.

This association of God's Word as the Bread of Life is a thread that runs throughout both Old and New Testaments. For instance:

- Moses explained to his people in the wilderness that "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." -- and
- When the prophet, Amos, spoke of famine, he was speaking not of bread or water, but of scarcity of the Word of the LORD. In the NT,
- Jesus, as he is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, recalls the words of Moses:

"It is written, one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Because these traditions about food are imbedded in the Judean culture,
Martha knows the meaning of the meal she will prepare for Jesus.

She is filled with great self-expectations:

to create a meal that symbolizes her devotion to God,
who has provided the food --
but she is also expecting Mary's help.

But Mary has chosen the better part. She knows she will not have this
opportunity every day,

so she chooses the "good portion" -- the "main course" of the meal --
to be fed the Word of Life -- and Jesus will not deprive her.//

Many of you might have the same problem as I in your daily living;
the distractions are endless when it comes to "having time" to rest in the Lord.
Reality often trumps the dream of having all the time in the world available for
reading, prayer, and reflection in a quiet place,
but it is the only element that can bring us closer with God.

In our contemporary lives we can easily underestimate the blessings of God's
constant and sustaining presence. We consume our physical bread
and ignore the spiritual bread that awaits us each and every day.
To be caught up in optional, fussy details is exhausting, and
can take time away from the important things in life.
Martha is exhausting herself in the details.

And yet -- I still can't imagine serving Jesus a meal without dessert! //

When our granddaughter Molly was about 4 years old, she came to bake cookies
with me. She was carrying her favorite cookie cutters, a child-size
"Cinderella" apron, and her child-size broom, and announced:
"Today I am going to bake cookies, wash the dishes, and sweep the floor -
and then, I'm going to be exhausted!"
The word "exhausted" from a preschooler's mouth startled me,
for I knew very well where she had heard it, many times before --
from my own mouth!

I suddenly realized that at the end of large family dinners, my comment to them
often would be, "I need to rest! I am exhausted!"
Baking cookies with grandchildren does not qualify as a needless activity,
for it is precious time that strengthens family ties and memories:
and this is the "good part" that cannot be taken away.

It reminds us of the fact that when we gather around food,
we are thankful:
for the social aspect of enjoying one another,
working together to produce something good to eat, and the
satisfaction in accomplishing it.

When we think on the good things that happen during such a time,
we can let go and enjoy the moment.

In the church, our hope and greatest expectation is that Christ will come to
this house each time we are gathered,
to impart a gracious meal of the Word,
which is Bread of the richest kind;
and we who have gazed into his face and learned from him
will go forth in his name to share it in the community.

Christ provides the focus and keeps us from succumbing to a life filled with no
real purpose other than making ourselves happy.
How boring and unrewarding that would be!

In this story, Christ reminds Martha - and all of us - to reconsider our lives,
to find the "good portion" and discard the constant fretting
that threatens to take its place.

Instead of pressuring ourselves with self-expectations,
we are encouraged to STOP -- and attend to the Word of Life.

It is in hearing Jesus' word that we learn who Jesus is --
then, we begin to understand our purpose in this life.

Opening ourselves to the gracious expectations that God has for us
will free us to a new world of joy and commitment to others.

Our lives will then be truly fulfilled, beyond our imagining.

We can trust that God will do this,
for his wisdom is beyond each and every one of us!//

Let us pray:

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and in your presence, let us rest.
By your hand we all are fed, Give us this day our daily bread. Amen.