

## SERMON 07-21-2019

I can see the point about wanting to live life to the fullest. But is all this anxiety and chasing down better options what a full life is all about? I think Jesus is partly addressing this question in our Gospel today. But his definition of living life to the fullest is different from ours.

*Martha, Martha, you worry over too many things. Only one thing is important. Mary has chosen the best role, which shall not be taken away from her. (Luke 11:4)*

Are you with Mary or with Martha? The story of Mary and Martha always seems to spell trouble. Many of us have suffered from friends or family members who leave us to do all the work while they idle away the time. It becomes particularly galling when we are frantically trying to entertain guests. I suspect it is out of this experience that we readily identify with Martha, while feeling miffed about Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus.

If we have trouble with this story, we can be assured of one thing: we aren't the first generation to do so. It seems that the Christians of the early centuries had their qualms, too. In the ancient manuscripts that have survived there are five variant readings of what Jesus said to Martha. When this occurs in manuscripts, it is a sure sign that those first Christians felt uncomfortable about something. So, take heart; you aren't the first to get edgy about this.

Regrettably, if we look at the whole story of Christianity this little scene in the home of Mary, Martha...and Lazarus (?), has been misused. It has been employed to set up a split between a life dedicated to prayer and meditation and one dedicated to practical service. Moreover, for the most part prayer and meditation (sitting at the feet of Jesus as folk have understood it) has been exalted to a superior place. It has been treated as *holier* than worldly demands and duties— Martha busy in the kitchen. Historically the life of monks, nuns and priests was regarded as being more godly than that of parents, merchants, laborers, teachers, tradesmen, clerks, cooks, scholars and street sweepers. The *Marthas* have been seen as inferior to the *Marys*. Maybe a bit of this still lingers on. But I suspect that today the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction; today we extol and admire the busy people, the achievers, the movers and shakers. We are a generation of doers. Prayer is not high on the ambitions list. Meditation is regarded as something for those who can't make it in the real world.

Quietly reading and pondering the Scriptures is for those who have the “religious bug.”

I do not believe that this passage justifies one way of life over the other. I do not accept that they should ever be split apart. We need both Mary and Martha. And they need to change roles often. Two sisters, Mary and Martha, open their home to Jesus. Martha wants to be the good host, so she rushes around fixing the meals, setting the table, taking care of all the details. Now let's be clear about this: Marthas are vitally important in our lives. Some of us would sure be in trouble if we didn't have a Martha to make sure things got done ...and done right. Still, the hard work and attention to detail of the Marthas of this world often get overlooked. It's really tough being a good host, to take care of others' needs, especially if no one seems to appreciate your efforts.

Look at Martha a little more closely and you will see a surprising thing. It is something not at first obvious to our culture and era. The intriguing thing is that we are told that it was *Martha* who invited Jesus to their house. That was an unheard of thing in Jewish culture of the time. Women were not permitted to go around inviting guests. It was a man's prerogative. So Martha is acting in a liberated, ground-breaking way. She is a pioneer.

I think we see in Martha something of the impact of Jesus on those around him. We see his liberation already at work. For him women were not inferior beings. Somewhere in the weeks before this event, Martha probably had already come under the affirming influence of the Man from Nazareth. That influence enabled her to go against convention and invite Jesus to dinner.

Now look closely at Mary. She is not at sitting at his feet swooning. Mary is sitting at his feet listening to Jesus teach. That expression “sitting at the feet” was a common way of stating that a man was receiving instruction from a Rabbi, a learned holy man. But here's— a woman! Women were not allowed to be taught. As one famous Rabbi said: “Better the Scriptures be burnt than taught to a woman.” What's going on here?

Like Martha, Mary had probably already come under the liberating influence of Jesus: she feels free to sit at his feet as a male disciple would. When Martha complains to Jesus that her sister isn't helping, Jesus says, “*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed— or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*”

So what we have here in this household is evidence of radical change. Mary and Martha are a part of the new humanity that comes into being through the influence of Jesus. Maybe— just maybe, no certainty— one of the reasons for what seems like a rebuke to Martha was that Martha had exerted her new-found liberty to invite Jesus to the house, yet then gets annoyed when her sister, Mary, dares to express her new liberty by daring to act like a man might. Jesus was not going to allow Mary to be put back in a domestic box.

Look closely at the words he spoke: “*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed— or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*” Jesus is not only affirming Mary’s new-found freedom, but is also stating that for a disciple there is only one essential pre-requisite: to sit still and listen,...and learn. We need to sit at his feet and learn all we can from what he says, what he does, and how he engages conversation.

Please don’t misunderstand. Jesus isn’t trying to pile guilt on Martha’s shoulders by exonerating Mary, but he’s trying to teach both sisters about the real essence of life.

Life is short. You only get one turn. Don’t get lured into using up your energy on what doesn’t matter for you. Only one thing matters. It is the better option. And it can’t be taken from you. Don’t miss out on the opportunity to know God.

Our society promotes backwards priorities. We promote achievement and consumption and cultivation of the self over relationship with God. Yet God is our Creator— the Way, the Truth, the Life. What good is life if it is not reflecting God’s glory and conforming to God’s plans? Don’t miss out on the joy of living for this moment.