

My mother was definitely a Martha kind of Christian. After a lifetime as a teacher and administrator, she retired and then went to American Samoa for five years as principal of the Baptist Academy of American Samoa. Then she came back to the mainland and for two years organized a satellite seminary program for African American clergy in San Diego. When she finally came back home to Alabama, she began teaching computer skills to her fellow senior citizens.

By the way, although she was a Baptist, she also really liked the Episcopal Church. Her favorite part of the service was the prayer of confession and especially the phrase, “those things we have left undone.” It gave her a whole new category of things to feel guilty about!

New Testament scholars like to talk about the “hard sayings” of Jesus. They mean things such as “Be perfect as your Father in heaven in perfect” or “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” or “If your right hand offends you, cut it off.” But if you give much thought to this story about Mary and Martha, then I think you’ll realize that it’s really one of the most puzzling and difficult things that Jesus said.

For one thing, the church of Jesus Christ has always depended on the Marthas of the world. It would be impossible for the church to survive without women such as Martha to prepare receptions after weddings and funerals, to polish the candles and communion vessels, to bring food to bereaved families, and so on.

Note that this story comes right after the story of the Good Samaritan. In that story, Jesus appears to condemn a priest and Levite who passed by the injured man while they were on their way to the Temple to perform their duties, and Jesus praises the Samaritan who stops, cleans the man’s wounds, takes him to an inn, and then pays the innkeeper to take care of him.

You could argue, much like Mary, the priest and Levite prioritized their spiritual duties over the more practical duties of caring for an injured man.

In other words, in the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus praises the one who takes care of earthly things first, and in the story of Mary and Martha, he lifts up Mary who chooses the path of spiritual service.

It’s confusing!

When I was seeking ordination in the Episcopal Church I went through a months long process when I met weekly with a group of others who also aspired to become priests. One of my other group members was a wonderful woman who was a pillar of her church. During one of our meetings she talked about the mess that was left in the church kitchen after a parish potluck. “Well, if I don’t clean it up, who will?” she asked.

Martha, Martha, Martha... “you are worried and distracted by many things...”

The church of Jesus Christ needs Marthas, whether they are women or men, but sometimes our Marthas can prevent the rest of us from learning the important lesson that all of us are responsible for cleaning the church kitchen; all of us are responsible for seeing that the altar vessels are polished; all of us have a role to play in bringing food to bereaved families.

I suspect that most of us are “default Marthas.” What I mean by that is, given a choice between praying and reading the Bible or making a casserole for someone who has lost a loved one, we will probably make the casserole. To paraphrase the woman in my ordination group, “If I don’t do it, who will?”

Now, here’s where my sermon takes a sharp left turn. Most sermons about his story are about why we should be like Mary and sit at the feet of Jesus in quiet contemplation. But I’m more interested in what this story tells us about moral and ethical dilemmas. More often than not our ethical choices are not between good and bad, they are between good and BETTER. In other words, the world is full of gray.

The choice between the two roles, the practical Martha and the prayerful Mary, is not a choice between wrong and right; it’s a choice between good and better.

Note what Jesus said to Martha: “Mary has chosen the BETTER part, which will not be taken away from her.”

“Mary has chosen the BETTER part...”

Martha’s busy-ness was not the WRONG choice; it just wasn’t the best choice under the circumstances.

Father Greg’s responsibility as rector is to make sure that this church will be here for generations to come. That’s a Martha-like responsibility. But I also believe that he will be better equipped to do that if he maintains his spiritual life. In other words, he needs to behave like Mary and sit quietly at the feet of Jesus and learn from him.

And that’s another difficult feature of Christian ethics: Sometimes the right thing becomes the wrong thing, and the wrong thing becomes the right thing. God gave us the ability to discern between right and wrong, between good and better and expects us to exercise that ability.

So how do we know whether to be Martha or Mary? How do we know when it’s time to be busy and distracted with many things or it’s time to pray and learn and be quiet?

We don’t always know, and frequently we make the wrong decision. And that is why we are saved by grace, not works. We are saved neither by being busy Marthas nor by being quiet Marys. We are saved by the love of God that was poured out for us on the cross of Jesus Christ.

Listen to these words from today’s second reading:

“... in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.” (Colossians 1.19-22)

I am not now, never have been, and never will be “blameless and irreproachable.” Sometimes I’m Martha when I should be Mary, and sometimes I’m Mary when I should be Martha. Sometimes I’m busy and distracted with many things when I should be sitting still and quiet at the feet of Jesus. At other times I’m lost in contemplation when I should be polishing the silver or making a casserole for someone who has lost a loved one. More often I choose the good when I could choose the better or even the best. And all too often I choose something that’s just completely wrong.

But God’s promise is that whether we are Mary or Martha, the one who’s quiet and contemplative or the one who is busy and distracted, Jesus reconciles us to God through the cross.

Philip Melanchthon was German Reformer Martin Luther’s right hand man, but Melanchthon was terribly neurotic. He was terrified that he would do the wrong thing and be condemned to everlasting punishment. So one day Luther said to him, “Philip, sin boldly... but love God more boldly still.”

It is inevitable that we will sin, that we will not choose what Jesus called “the better part.” Accept it. Accept that you are flawed, broken, sinful, but love God and rejoice that just as Jesus came to stay with Mary and Martha, so he comes to stay with us. Amen.