

Are you a Martha? Or a Mary? Despite the feminine names, most of us—even you men—tend to bear the characteristics of one or the other.

My mother was a Martha. She was raised in the Martha mold, and she raised *me* to be a Martha, too. Somehow my sister resisted the Martha lesson and became a Mary. Fortunately, through the years I've learned how to be a Mary, and now I enjoy putting aside the work of my life in order to practice being Mary. Nevertheless, there have too many times when I took the Martha role, my sister took the Mary role, and conflict ensued. I understand Martha's frustration and resentment all too well, and I'd be willing to bet some of you do, too.

Though the players in our Gospel story today are women, this is not an issue of gender. It's not an issue of older sibling and younger sibling. Or extrovert and introvert. Or even about serving and being served, though I wonder about all of those things when I read this story. Whatever the story is not, it sure says a lot about busyness.

Busyness is a hallmark of our lives. Our days, and often our nights, too, are filled with places to go, people to see, and things to do. We wear our busyness like a medal of honor. Busyness makes us feel important, and sometimes we use it as an excuse for not doing things we don't want to do, though we do manage to find the time for activities we *want* to be part of. Even when we feel like our lives are running us instead of us running our lives, we make choices about how we spend our time, just as Mary and Martha did.

In a painting by 16<sup>th</sup> century artist Vincenzo Campi named "Christ in the House of Mary and Martha," Martha is literally surrounded by piles of foodstuff waiting to be prepared for a meal. There are fish, game, and fowl to be cleaned, and fruits and vegetables to be washed. No wonder Martha wanted Mary's help! But when you look more closely at the painting, you can see through the kitchen to another room where Jesus and Mary are seated together in conversation. Mary appears to be looking toward the kitchen, where Martha is feeling the burden of her choice.

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

A friend of mine jokingly wonders why these sisters would call upon a man to settle their argument, even if the man *is* our Lord and Savior. But this is more than a sisterly dispute. And it's not just an issue of hospitality, although the argument could be made that Martha has forgotten that spending time with her guests is an important part of making them feel welcome. Martha was no doubt surprised by Jesus' response when she enlisted his help. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things." How did she feel when he said that "Mary has chosen the better part?"

What does that mean, exactly? Is Jesus telling Martha that she should ignore the presence of guests in her house, forget about making a meal for them? I don't think that's the case. I believe Jesus is leading Martha to examine her priorities, to think about what is important to her and how her life *shows* what is important to her. Jesus seems to think that Martha's busyness is getting in the way of what's really important—in this case just being with her Lord, listening to him. Martha's life had gotten out of balance. What she was doing became more important than who she was doing it for.

In her book, *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*, Joanna Weaver tells about playing with her mother's decorative brass balance scales when she was supposed to be practicing piano. The scales sat on the piano with several pieces of artificial fruit on either side. The plastic fruit was arranged so that one side of the scale was slightly higher than the other. Weaver liked to rearrange the fruit and did it so often that she knew which fruits were heavier and which were similar in weight to the

others. She thought it was fun to move the fruits from one side to the other to see how it affected the balance of the scales.

One day she spied her grandmother's glass grapes sitting on another table in the living room where she was practicing. She arranged all of the artificial fruit on one side of the scales, then put the glass grapes on the other side. As soon as she let go of the grapes, they "dropped like a brick on the mahogany surface of her mother's treasured piano, damaging the piano and sending the plastic fruit flying.

The imbalance of the glass grapes and the plastic fruit is not unlike what can happen in our lives if we don't seek balance between doing and being. Like Martha, we can find ourselves focusing more on what we're doing than on who we're doing it for. Maybe that's understandable, because unlike Mary, we don't have the human person of our Lord to sit with and listen to. We have to work at being able to hear his voice, and sometimes that takes far more effort than simply doing what we believe Jesus would have us do.

In his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney writes "Many of us need to realize the addiction we have to noise." We are uncomfortable with silence, just as we are uncomfortable with having nothing to do. It is hard to shut it all off. But the noise and the busyness can act as a buffer between us and Christ, a subconscious resistance to intimacy with our Lord. Is that because we don't want to hear what we think God will say to us? More likely, it's just because we find it difficult to make the connection. And if that's the case, we just have to keep trying, intentionally seeking ways to sit at Jesus' feet in order to hear what he's saying to us. When we do, our actions will take flight from what we hear, and our lives will reflect the balance of service and contemplation and the value we place on our Lord's guidance and love.

Let us pray.

Holy God, you have created us in your own image, and so we know that you love and value each of us, both in times of doing and in times of being. Send your spirit to guide us so that we may know when it is time to sit and listen for your voice and when it is time to get up and act. Give us both Mary's peace and Martha's purpose, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*