

Sermon, July 17, 2022  
Luke 10:24-38

“Martha vs. Mary”

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, they stop in a village not named, and Jesus enters the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary, leading to a clash of temperaments. While Mary sits and listens to Jesus, Martha, being a good hostess, is busy preparing a meal. She quickly gets angry that Mary is not helping her and says to Jesus “Tell her to give me a hand.” Jesus replies, “...you are worried and troubled about many things. Only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part, and it is not going to be taken away from her.” What are we to make of all this?

It helps to remember that Jesus is heading to Jerusalem where he has foretold that it is there that he is destined to die. So, when he says, “Only one thing is necessary”, he is probably saying to Martha, don’t make a big fuss, that he just wanted some peaceful moments before facing the ordeal ahead. Of course, Martha is not aware of what lies ahead for him and is just wanting to show good hospitality. When he says that Mary had chosen the better part we may sense that he wants to get his message out there before it is too late - that what he is saying is of prime importance. Does this mean that what Martha is doing is wrong? Of course not! Jesus is well aware of the importance of Jewish traditions concerning hospitality. That is why he doesn’t say that Mary has chosen the **only** part - just the **better** part.

What are the two parts? We can see one, Mary’s part, as the spiritual, and the second, Martha’s part, as service. What I also hope we can see is how inter-related the two are.

The spiritual has numerous components to it, including scripture, prayer, as well as the way in which we perceive God.

First, scripture. It has been said that for fundamentalists scripture is the end of the conversation- that is with the attitude of ‘the Bible says it, I believe it, and that’s it’. Whereas others see the scriptures at the beginning of the discussion - that it is open to interpretation and exploration - a starting place for trying to understand God and the world.

For centuries there has also been debate concerning what the church sees as authoritative. For Roman Catholics it has always been scripture and tradition, while, for Protestants, the idea of ‘scripture alone’ has been predominant. However, since the last century, Roman Catholics have become more focused on scripture, and Protestants more open to tradition.

There are also different ways of reading the Bible - first, in terms of study, seeking to understand from a theological and historical approach, but, also, reading it devotionally, allowing

it to speak not only to the mind, but to the heart as well - allowing God's voice to reveal itself from within.

Prayer also has many different facets. Perhaps the most common approach is prayer as petitionary- that is, asking for things - although the true essence of such prayer is not asking for material things, but for spiritual gifts, for healing, for forgiveness - as well as offering thanksgiving.

Prayer can also be meditative, or contemplative - a solitary approach to prayer that has more to do with listening than speaking or asking. It is the opening of oneself to the sacred and divine, to find conversion or transformation. As it has been said, the purpose of prayer is not to change God, but to change the one who prays.

As I mentioned before, the spiritual has to do with your basic perception of God. Ultimately, God is Mystery, but open to discovery. Is God transcendent, meaning sort of distant, in a faraway place called heaven, but still loving and concerned, or is God immanent, that is, intimately present in all things - even within ourselves? As Jesus said, the kingdom of God is within you, or in the midst of you, speaking in terms of a congregation. I tend to think in terms of the latter. The question is whether we are open or closed off to the God within.

Also, if God is immanent, then we have to recognize that God is present to all - not just Christians - as well as Nature and the whole of Creation. But I'll save that for another day.

The idea of service also takes many forms, beginning with Martha, and the idea of hospitality, and all the tasks of cooking, and cleaning, administrating, teaching, etc. All things essential to the life of the church. And then there is broader outreach - being servants in and to the world - especially reaching out to those who are broken and hurting, those who are sick and dying, those who are poor and hungry, those who are lost and searching for meaning, for faith, and for hope, and striving for justice and peace.

The spiritual and service are not mutually exclusive, they are complementary, feeding into one another.

Devotional practice inspires us to serve and empowers us for that service. In the 25th chapter of Matthew, Jesus points out that to serve others in need is service to God. When we recognize the connection between the two, we understand that service is Prayer translated into action, that acting out of love is to participate in and share the love of God.

I entitled this sermon "Martha vs. Mary", but the relationship between them is not contradictory, instead, they reveal and embody the two essential dimensions of Christian faith. Amen.

**Let us pray:** Loving God, ever gracious and kind, we thank you for this day, and ask that you help us make the best of it. On this Sabbath day may we rest in you, always mindful of your divine presence, your saving and healing power, revealed to us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Like Mary, may we find ourselves seated at his feet ready to listen and to learn, and through that be empowered to be your hands and feet in the world, doing all that is pleasing to you.

Help us to hear your Word as it shines forth out of the scriptures and touches our hearts and minds in the depths of prayer. Give us the spiritual eyes to see and ears to hear, so that your will and our will become one and the same. May your love shine through us in all that we say and do and forgive us when we fail or are reluctant to be your emissaries in this world, so much in need of healing. Help us to understand the ways of true peace and justice, and give to us the strength, the courage, and the faith, to walk in such ways.

This morning we lift up those in need of healing, and those who yearn for peace of mind, remembering to you... Amen.