

MARY AND MARTHA NOT MARY OR MARTHA

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Luke shows us masterful skill in his story telling as he places the story of Mary and Martha immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan. In both stories we see someone breaking the social norm. In both stories we people acting in ways that are both unexpected and unacceptable to traditional society.

Martha is doing what would be expected. The woman belonged in the kitchen preparing the food. Mary was doing what a disciple would do, sitting at the feet of the master, but she was a woman and this was not her place according to the rules of society. Therefore Martha is absolutely within her rights to complain. Yet Jesus turns the tables on the readers just as he did in to the lawyer in last week's parable of the Good Samaritan.

The true link here hit me as I read the Message translation. Peterson translates v 42 as, "One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her." Notice he does not use the word better, but uses the word essential.

So what is the essential that Mary has chosen? The essential is Jesus. It really is that simple. Mary has chosen to make Jesus the essential part of her life, the focus of her life. This passage is not about being Mary or Martha, but that the essential in all our lives is Jesus.

Now all of us lean one way or the other and that is understandable, but when one loses the focus and goes all to one side, then the problems begin. This is not an either or message but a both and. This is not that service is bad and the contemplative life is good. This is not about which is more important. What is important is the focus. In this case the focus is on Jesus.

The point is that ministry that feeds us, that helps us to grow flows first and foremost from a relationship with God. When we are focused on being doers, we forget the why behind what that we are doing. I keep pushing us to ask the question why are we here. The answer in part is that there is a huge difference between doing good and doing good in the name of Christ.

The world is full of good social agencies. Secular humanists do wonderful humanitarian work because they believe this is how a civilized society lives. They don't need to believe in God to know that allowing people to go hungry while others have more than they need is wrong.

Before joining the Episcopal Church, I was a member of a church in Northern Ohio. Wendy and I joined it because it had excellent music and good social outreach. Do you see already

what is missing? They were struggling in part because all they were was a really good social agency with a great choir! This church had lost their focus of what was essential. Bishop Clark Grew, the previous bishop of Ohio asked at one of our diocesan gatherings the question of what makes Christian service Christian. Mary provides our answer. We are doing service in the name of Christ. Christ is the focus, the reason and the driving force behind everything we do. Christ is what is essential to Christian ministry. We ignore this at great peril to our ministry.

This past quarter's Weavings magazine had a wonderful article on today's passage. The article written by Jan Johnson was *Finding Guidance in the Rhythm of Contemplation and Action*. She speaks of being a Mary who had to get acquainted with her Martha. The problem with the Martha's of the world is this. "Compassion fatigue is inevitable because we weren't built to run on our own power but on the companionship and guidance of God."¹ She speaks of learning to be either a contemplative activist or an active contemplative, depending on your preferred style.

This was the problem with my church in Cleveland. They were a great social agency, but a lousy church, why? They had forgotten the better part, the essential part. They had forgotten that they existed as disciples of Jesus first and foremost. The result was that people were burned out by at a very high rate of speed. All of their focus was on outgo; there was nothing that fed them in their ministry.

This for me is the attractiveness of Benedictine spirituality. Benedictine spirituality calls us to blend prayer and work into one so that all work is prayer. Here is how that plays out in my own life.

I was with a mission team from St. David's in Ashburn Virginia on a trip to Honduras. We were helping build a bathhouse for the El Hogar orphanage. We were at the basic construction stage and being Honduras the building was going to be made out of cinder block. When I arrived we were starting to make the foundation. In Honduras there is no such thing as pre-made anything. A good concrete foundation requires reinforced concrete. What greeted us was piles of 12-foot lengths of half inch rebar, a stack of quarter inch steel bar and lots of thin wire. My team's assignment was to make the rectangular reinforcing structure from these raw materials. My portion of the job was to take the quarter inch steel and form the rectangular boxes that the larger pieces of rebar would be wired to. There was on 3.8ths inch rectangle about every three inches. The bathhouse was about 30 foot by 20 feet. These reinforcing structures also went around every door and window so you can imagine the vast number of these that had to be made.

My tools were a wooden form with three nails and a tool that looked something like a small crowbar that allowed me to bend the steel. I stood under a tree and began to make these. This was incredibly boring. Then the inspiration hit me. I began to use the prayer that I say as I do my prayers in the morning with my rosary. Soon I was in a rhythm and to my delightful found myself in a very peaceful place. Every ten rectangles or so I would stop and say a prayer for the boys who would soon use this bathhouse. Sean O'Keefe then the head

of NASA was standing next to me and asked me what I was doing. I told him and he joined me in that rhythm of prayer and work made one.

Now think of the difference this made. We were praying for all the boys that would be served while we were making the foundation for the building. Every piece of metal that went into that structure had been soaked in our prayer during those three days. The magnitude of that hit me as I watched the fresh concrete poured over that reinforcing rebar structure once they were ready to go. They disappeared from sight, but they were there and so were the prayers of the makers.

I do believe that this shows what it means to keep Christ at the center of service. What had started as a day of mind numbing work became a day of communion with Christ. I also believe that this makes a difference for the boys at this Episcopal orphanage.

With our youth going off for a week of mission work I want to challenge you to use this as an example. Jan Johnson in her Weavings article² gave several great suggestions on how to keep your focus on Christ as you go through the week.

Reflect before serving:

Before you start your service or work, stop and pray for a moment. I do this before entering a hospital room, meeting, church service, just about anything I do that is ministry. I ask God to put me in the right frame of mind and to help me pay attention to those to whom I will minister.

Work slowly enough for nudges to be noticed

If we do not slow down enough for the gentle nudges we get from God, we miss opportunities and eventually the gentle nudge becomes a sledgehammer. In my Honduras experience it was being mindful of the call to pray as I worked. If I had just plunged in I might have missed that opportunity.

Be present while serving

Focus on the ministry you are doing. Stay in the present and practice the ministry of presence. Be there with the people you are serving at that moment. The best advice on being present is the three S's Show up, sit down and shut up.

Reflect after serving

Take time at the end of your time in a particular ministry or at the end of the day to reflect on the experience. St. Ignatius suggests that you do this each day. Go through the day and ask God where God was present in each of the moments or interactions of the day.

Confess negative feelings and reactions

Sometimes ministry brings us into conflict with the people we serve or with those we serve with. Sort out where these feelings come from and why you are experiencing them.

Call out for God's help

You find yourself in over your head. Then ask God for help. Remember we do ministry with and for Christ. Do not be afraid to ask for help.

Celebrate with others;

Enjoy and celebrate your ministry! That may seem obvious, but celebrate your successes and your victories. Celebrate your failures because at least you tried. Learn from them and move on.

For our youth, one of the blessings of the program you are about to attend is that much of this advice is built into the structure of your day. For you will in fact be working in a Benedictine way.

- The rest of us can learn from this model as well. Do what we do in Christ's name, not in our name. Christ is the essential.

¹ Weavings Volume XXV Number 3 The Upper Room Nashville TN 2010 pg 37

² Ibid pg. 39