

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 18, 2010 (Proper 11, Year C)*

Sibling rivalry is nothing new. That's one thing we learn from the story of Mary and Martha. These two sisters probably disagreed about all sorts of things – whose turn it was to clear the table, who got to stay up later, who was better at baseball. Oh, wait, that's my house. But here it blows up over the fact that Martha's running around like a servant, whisking dishes on and off the table and wiping sweat off her brow while Mary just sits at Jesus' feet hanging on every word. And Martha says to Jesus – whines really – “Don't you care that I'm doing all the work around here? Tell Mary to help me.” I get that when it comes to cleaning up the family room. “Don't you care that I'm doing all the work? Tell him to help me.” Justice is a big theme in my domestic life.

And at first glance it's *not* fair. Why should Martha do all the work of hospitality while Mary gets to enjoy the company of their honored guest? For those of us who tend to be the worker-bees at home or around church that really grates – we can relate to Martha's self-imposed martyrdom.

And anyway isn't Jesus sending mixed messages? A few weeks ago we heard the story of Jesus attending a dinner party at the house of Simon the Pharisee; you remember that shindig where a woman shows up uninvited and anoints Jesus' feet with oil. And he calls out his host for not being appropriately hospitable. You can't have it both ways, Jesus. You can't demand hospitality and then chastise someone for providing it.

But Jesus, as he often does, is using the situation to make a larger point; one that transcends social customs and sibling rivalry. He is stressing the urgency of God's call and the single-minded devotion demanded of discipleship. He's not saying that providing hospitality is a bad thing – you can't just ignore your guests – and he refuses to get sucked into the conflict between two sisters. But his words to Martha make clear that everything we do must be in the context of God's call. Nothing can stand in the way of Jesus' ministry and nothing can come before our relationship with Jesus Christ. So the point is that seeking the Kingdom of God must come before all else – even common hospitality.

“But Martha was distracted by her many tasks” – that's the reason given for her not paying attention to Jesus. And who among us *can't* relate to that statement? As human beings we are a distracted lot. Even amid the supposedly slower pace of summer, I know I get distracted by my many tasks. Besides all of the details of church life there are groceries to buy and meals to cook and dishes to wash and kids to pick up from camp and a house to clean and out-of-town guests to prepare for and e-mail to check and a dump run to make and phones to answer and little league games to coach and a dog to walk. Fine, I don't ever get to the grocery store but I'm involved with all those other things – for the most part. It's no wonder our minds spin out of control even

as we attend to the many mundane tasks that keep us from being fully present with God and one another.

You can't blame Martha for being distracted – there's a lot to do! But Jesus reminds her and us that everything else can wait; that if we're not in right relationship with God all of our running around is pointless. When God is not at the center of our lives we become the proverbial chicken with its head cut off, running this way and that for no apparent reason. And in the process dying a slow, if active, death.

Instead, he brings the conversation back to what really matters here: discipleship. It's not that "being" with the Lord is greater than "doing" for the Lord. This story is often boiled down to this: Mary personifies being with the Lord while Martha exemplifies doing for the Lord. There are times and places for both. Being and Doing are the double-sided coin of discipleship. Sometimes we must be engaged in actively serving God through mission work, good deeds, and generosity. At others, we must contemplate God through prayer, meditation on God's word, and silence. If we pray all the time and never act, we're not fully living out the Christian life. And, conversely, if we act all the time and never pray, we're not fully living out the Christian life. That's what Jesus is trying to convey to Martha and Mary and us.

So how can we integrate being and doing in our own lives? We clearly need both. Because the reality is that it takes both faith and action, both contemplation and hard work to accomplish the work of ministry in a church community and in our individual spiritual lives. If everyone was a monk, the prayer life of our church would be astounding. And if everyone was a relief worker in Haiti the mission of reaching out to a world in need would be an inspiration. But we need a balance.

And it is here that I find the Benedictine concept of integrating body, mind, and spirit to be particularly helpful. For St. Benedict and his 4<sup>th</sup> century monks, life was all about balance. To live life itself as a prayer meant that even the mundane tasks of life like mowing the lawn or chopping vegetables were seen as acts of prayer, done to the glory of God. Granted when the kids are screaming at you for chicken nuggets at 6:30 pm on a school night, it's hard to see the toaster oven as a holy object. But that's precisely what he encouraged his monks to do. And we can, at least sometimes, try to do the same in our own lives. It may only be in retrospect but it's a way of integrating the doing and being of our spiritual lives.

There is no doubt that our lives are full of distractions. Just sit in a quiet room by yourself and watch your mind spin. And even as I drone on up here, some of your minds are distracted by other things. I can tell. It takes practice and discipline to quiet the mind in prayer; to balance the being of Mary with the doing of Martha. But sometimes you simply have to stop what you're doing and put down the proverbial serving plates in order to allow your life to have the true meaning that Jesus intends.