

“The Yin And The Yang”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

In many ways, this Martha - Mary story has got to be one of the most annoying episodes in the gospels. Annoying because it always seems to leave you between a rock and a hard place. If you're too much like active Martha; then you are ignoring your host. If you're too much like passive Mary, then you are sitting on a chair with dog hair all over it. Martha may be Martha Stewart, but you hate her for it. Mary may have chosen the better part, but the Board of Health is banging on the front door. They tried ringing the bell but it is broken.

I tell you, I've been to Martha's house. We all have. She's someone I haven't seen in a while and I want to do some catch up time. She has welcomed me with great enthusiasm and has put out the best china and linens and great desserts and every time I look, my coffee cup is miraculously refilled. And she pops up and down to check the stove, the refrigerator, the microwave, talks while moving about until I've had it and finally exclaim, “For crying out loud, will you just sit down and talk with me!” After all, I did come to be with her, not her dishes.

I have also been to Mary's house and so have you. The moment I arrived she grabbed me by the arm and ushered me to the couch. We sit and talk and talk and sit, sit and talk and the hours go by and by and I'm getting hungry and I have to cough before a glass of water is offered. The room grows cold and the window is open and she doesn't get up to close it or turn up the heat. Well, I guess we had a good visit but I leave cold, hungry, and uncomfortable.

In popular misconceptions Martha and Mary came off like that, the Oscar Madison and the Felix Unger of the first century. They're both wrong, of course, if they go to extremes, but, even so, it's Martha who usually gets the bum rap here, too busy with practical things. Why can't she be more like Mary? Why can't we?

Well, that's the usual “moral” of the story, but before we deal with that, I want to say that there is really much more to this gospel and these two sisters than we usually think. Behind its short sentences, there are some surprisingly deeper revelations going on that first -century Christians would have, with some initial amazement, immediately picked up and discussed. So let us twenty-first century Christians discover what it was that caught their attention.

First, Mary. Take another look at what she is doing, where she is. “She has a sister Mary who sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak.” Given the customs of the time where male and female roles were strictly demarcated, with women confined to the kitchen and the men to the living room, Mary is remarkable for crossing the boundaries. She boldly came in where Jesus was and did what only men were allowed to do. She sat at the feet of Jesus. This was the customary symbolic sign that someone wished to be a master's student, his disciple, something open only to men. There is, after all, that verse in the Talmud that states, “It is better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman.”

But Mary ignored all this and presented herself as a disciple and thereby assumed equality with men. Jesus not only allowed it, but praised it and so, once more, he turned the world upside down. And that openness, that mutual respect, that acceptance, that equality is a powerful between-the-lines subtext of this gospel, something we should not let pass unnoticed.

Then there's Martha. She comes across, perhaps, as Type A personality who can't sit still. But this is to underestimate her position, her passion, and her faith. To gain appreciation of Martha, we recall her in another well-known gospel story. She appears in John's gospel where she and her sister Mary are grieving over the death of her brother Lazarus.

Do you recall that it is forceful Martha who speaks up and dares to scold Jesus. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." But, more than that, it is Martha who on this occasion winds up making a stunning profession of faith every bit equal to that of Peter, who at the village of Caesarea Philippi, in answer to Jesus' question, "Who do people say that I am?" responded, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Well here, near her brother's burial place in the village of Bethany, Martha says the same thing to Jesus. After Martha's complaint, Jesus had said to her, "Everyone who believes in me will never die." And then he asked her, "Do you believe this?" And Martha responded, "We have come to believe you are the Messiah. Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." And there she is proclaiming the same words, the same faith, as Peter, thereby becoming his female counterpart and co-founder of the faith.

You see, between the lines, as we said, there is something revolutionary being said here in this brief, familiar gospel story of the two sisters. We should be alert to it.

But let's go back now and take the both of them at the more familiar face value and learn a lesson here as well. From them we learn that we have to stop making a false opposition between the activism of Martha and the quietude of Mary – action and contemplation – as if one were better than the other.

Jesus' remark that Mary had chosen the better part is not to dismiss the business of Martha, but is meant to underscore balance, as if Jesus were saying to the Marthas of the world, "Stop what you are doing and reclaim your centre. What are you doing all this for? Have you lost a sense of life's purpose? What motivates you? How does your life, your work, fit into the large picture?"

I must say I've been thinking about these questions as I prepare to move into my new call as Assistant to the Bishop and when I will be reality to pastors' in church ministries. Fidelity and competence are not enough. You must get at the centre of it all. Over my own 29 years of parish ministry, I tried to go away, meaning away in the country, at a retreat centre, twice a year in order to reclaim why I was doing what I was doing. I would encourage my colleagues to do the same. We, who are parish Marthas, should play "Mary" for a day so that mere busy competence does subvert spirituality. So that, in short, in their work for the Lord they wouldn't forget to pay attention to the Lord in their work. All Marthas, and the centre evaporates and burnout sets in. All Marys, and charity and service to others is undone.

And so with all of us. This gospel calls for balance in our lives. After all try to recall that today's gospel reading follows last week's gospel of the Good Samaritan where, at the end of this parable, Jesus commanded, "Go and do likewise." Yes, do the works of mercy and compassion, but don't let your good deeds get separated from the word of God, from the reason for it all. That is why, for all of us Marthas, it is imperative to frequently play Mary's role in our lives. That is why all of us must take time for prayer, reflecting worship – or so I think!

My brothers and sisters in Christ. These two pioneering women, Martha and Mary, aren't opposites and we should not separate them. They are the yin and yang of a balanced spiritual life. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.