

Sermon: July 21, 2019

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Today's gospel has kind of an abrupt ending. It's not that the story continues and next week we'll hear "the rest of the story." The end of today's reading is the end of chapter 10. Chapter 11 starts in a different place, with Jesus teaching the apostles how to pray. But that leaves us with some unfinished business, I think.

Martha has made what many might think is a reasonable request. After all, it was the women's job in that society to prepare meals. If dinner for the group is to be on time, she needs help. Her sister Mary is out in the living room listening to Jesus instead of helping with dinner. Martha asks Jesus to redirect Mary's attention to the practical needs of the group. Jesus declines. That's the end of the story as presented by Luke. I've often wondered how Martha responded to Jesus's reply. There are several possibilities, aren't there? Let's look at one possible continuation of this story. We'll back up a bit into Luke's story:

“⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” Martha looks at Jesus and takes his reply as an invitation. So, she sits down in the living room. There's an audible gasp from the apostles and disciples when they realize that they won't be having dinner real soon. But Jesus just smiles and continues teaching. He speaks of the primary role of love in the Kingdom of God. If one wants to live the kingdom, one must become a servant to all. That is our response to God's gracious invitation to us to join in the work of bringing the Kingdom about.

Jesus talks for an hour or so. It's getting late. When he finishes, Martha, Mary and Jesus go into the kitchen. The ladies finish preparing the barley loaves for the dinner. Jesus' job is to unburn the lentils that were left too close to the fire. A fine meal is served and enjoyed by all. This brings the story to at least one possible, proper ending, doesn't it? It's not the only possible ending, but at least it doesn't leave the story dangling.

So, what's the difference between Martha's earlier work in the kitchen as told by Luke and the continuation from my imagination? It's that Jesus is present in the latter, isn't it? Before, Martha was worried, distracted, frustrated and not just a little angry. She hadn't remembered that the kingdom's work is service. Yes, she needed to listen to Jesus, really listen. She had heard his teaching several times but hadn't internalized it. She hadn't really heard it. She didn't apply it to herself. Previously, Jesus was teaching the crowds, the Jewish Temple leaders, the disciples. This evening, Jesus was teaching her. This evening she listened. She realized that she needed Jesus in the kitchen with her.

The 16th century Carmelite mystic, Teresa of Avila, once said "Love turns work into rest". To which I might add: into happiness and, into joy. Love was not present with Martha in the kitchen earlier, only frustration was. Love was present later. How could she have helped love be present earlier?

Let's turn to a 17th century monk, Brother Lawrence. As a young man, Nicholas Hermann had been a soldier during the 30 years' war between the Catholics and the Protestants. It was a brutal war. The Germanic states lost 20% of their population, fully 50% in the area between the Black Forest and the Baltic Sea. The war ended not because someone won, but because they ran out of people to do the fighting and people to

kill. Lawrence was horrified by carnage he experienced during the war. He decided to change his life.

When he was 26, he entered a Carmelite monastery as a lay brother, taking the name Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. Lay brothers concentrate on works of service (as opposed what we might think of as the more monk-like duties of prayer and hymns). Brother Lawrence was assigned to the kitchen. He decided to offer his work to God. Over time, he developed a habitual sense of God's constant presence in his life. He was able to transform the mundane work in the kitchen into glorious experiences of heaven. He turned work into prayer, into rest, into joy.

Brother Lawrence lived for 51 years at the monastery. After his death, the abbot wrote down some of his recollections of conversations with Brother Lawrence and gathered the monk's letters. These were published in a book titled: *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In it, Brother Lawrence talks about living his life explicitly in God's presence. He says, "We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed." That's what Martha missed, isn't it?

And perhaps it's something we miss, too. At least, I know I do. Of course, few of us are monastics. Martha wasn't either. But God invites even us who live in the secular world to journey with Him. We do have a lot to say about that journey -- our goals, our ambitions, our loves, our skills. God only asks to be included. Brother Lawrence says: "He does not ask much of us, merely a thought of Him from time to time, a little act of adoration, sometimes to ask for His grace, sometimes to offer Him your sufferings, at other times to thank Him for the graces, past and present, Lift up your heart to Him during your meals and in company;

the least little remembrance will always be the most pleasing to Him. One need not cry out very loudly; He is nearer to us than we think.”

You might try these little things. They really aren't too difficult, but, as the title of the book suggests, they take practice. It's not natural in our society, in the rush and busyness of our daily lives. Perhaps you'll need a little something affixed to the fridge or a cabinet handle to remind you that Jesus is with you, making sure you don't burn the lentils. Or, maybe something in your car to remind you that God is riding with you. That might change how you react to the driver who cut you off. And as you practice, these little things might become habitual. Today, we might call it “staying in the moment,” but it's more than that, it's staying in the moment with God. Then, when life becomes too mundane, when you become harried, worried or distracted, like Martha did, it would be more natural to remember God's continual presence with you. Ask for his grace to become calm so you can focus on the job at hand and then offer it to him.

Try it this week. Begin to develop the habit of returning to God in your daily tasks. The Martha in you will be very much happier. Amen.