

Amos 8:1-12  
Psalm 82

Colossians 1:15-28  
Luke 10:38-42

There is nothing like a sibling rivalry. I know. I grew up with a twin brother. And boy did we get into fights. We never really got into any fisticuffs. However, Mom and Dad were not home and my brother Richard and I got into a fight. I chased him around the house with a broom, planning on hitting him with it. He ran into the bathroom and was shutting the door when I came down with the broom handle and put a hole in that door. When Mom and Dad came home, they asked what happened, and, of course, we both said, "I don't know."

Well, we see sibling rivalry in today's gospel lesson. There was no physical fighting. Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, a home she shared with her sister Mary. Martha was a good hostess, the kind of hostess who made sure that all the details of hosting were taken care of. Most of us know what it is like to busy ourselves with all the details of being good hosts. She was busy boiling the water, cutting the vegetables, setting the table for three, and tidying up around the house. She might have been quite anxious, wanting to make sure everything was covered. She "was distracted by her many tasks." You might identify with her. When she sees her sister Mary, sitting on the floor, she is upset. I could see Martha banging a few pots and putting the plates on the table with a sturdy thump! She's muttering under her breath with her complaints. In her anxiety of being a busy bee, she is frustrated that her sister was not helping her with the household chores. She finally snaps and demands, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Jesus responded, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from

her.” I could just see Mary sticking her tongue out at Martha. As one commentator suggested, Jesus did not criticize Martha for being busy, but for being worried and distracted Martha. A worried and distracted Martha.

This parable does reflect a dichotomy between the active life and the contemplative life. These two women, Mary and Martha, represent two characteristics of ministry. There is Martha’s style of doing. It is an active life of service in the church: manning the coffee corner, teaching Sunday School, visiting shut-ins and the hospitalized, helping with mailings, feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison, singing in the choir or ringing bells, mowing an elderly person’s lawn or removing snow for them, serving food in a soup kitchen, working at a homeless shelter. I think you get the picture. Mary represents the contemplative life, sitting at Jesus feet and learning from him. This contemplative life involves studying God’s word, being shaped by our understanding of God’s word, hearing God’s message in worship, and sitting quietly to hear the still, small voice of God. It is wrestling with God’s word. But this story does not force a dichotomy between these two characteristics of ministry. This story does not declare that Mary’s contemplative life was better than Martha’s busy life of service.

For years this story was interpreted to mean we are to prioritize the contemplative life over the active life. The better life was that of prayer and contemplative; the quiet life being “more perfect” than the active. Douglas Hall, in his commentary on this passage, suggests that in this close friendship of Jesus with this family there were other occasions when Martha was praised for her caring deeds and Mary gently chided for her ease and chatter. Different occasions call for different emphases. Sometimes we need to be active, a doer, like Martha. Other times we need

to be like Mary, contemplative, listening, studying. But as one theologian has pointed out, while in English we hear that Mary has chosen “the better part,” in Greek the word is translated as “good.” Being contemplative is not a better part, it is a good part. Mary has chosen a good part, meaning she has chosen “the connection to God who is good, the ground and energy of effective action.” John Calvin, one of the Protestant Reformers of the Sixteenth Century, considered the founder of Reformed faith and polity, criticized those who claimed this passage was to assert the superiority of the contemplative life over active service.

Others suggest that this story was used by the early church to restrict the role of women from an active life of service in the church. Jesus complimented Mary for simply sitting and listening and this should be the role of women in the church. There are Christian churches who try to restrict the role of women in ministry, particularly leadership roles in the church. However, it can be read differently.

We find here a dichotomy, a dichotomy between speaker and doer, contemplative and active. But this really is a false dichotomy. They are two sides of the same coin. They must both be present in our lives and in the church. And we cannot do one to the exclusion of another. That does not mean they have to be perfectly balanced. But sometimes we need to be in one mode, another time in another mode. And many of us will work in one mode more than the other.

This also speaks about the church’s ministry. As Dr. Hall points out, activism without contemplation ends in aimless doing that usually aggravates existing difficulties. A good example of this today, I think is that the church today is “worried and distracted” by institutional survival. All across our nation the church is in decline. Ever since 1965,

mainline denominations have been in decline, and now the last few decades the evangelical, fundamentalists churches have begun to be in decline. Sure, there are churches that grow. But they are the exception. Most churches are struggling with decreasing membership and decreasing financial resources. In their worry and anxiety, the church gets involved in anxious stewardship campaigns, becomes restless trying out the latest program in church growth, dumbs down worship that it becomes nothing more than entertainment, and busies itself with all kinds of programs hoping to attract people and grow the church. Many churches are worried and distracted by the decline, they are forgetting why they are a church. The purpose of the church is not institutional survival, but mission. Yes, mission includes evangelism and stewardship, but not institutional survival. In her anxiety and distraction, decisions are made in committees without a hint of God's reign. Food and drink will appear at table without Christ being recognized in the breaking of bread. The business of the church is being done without any word of the God who they think they have agreed to serve. As Christians, and as a church, mission activity must be based on and supported by our understanding of God, who God is, and what God is calling the church to do. We need to divert our focus from institutional survival and focus on mission. If our activity, if our actions, if the ministry of the church is not based on an understanding of God's word, God's ministry, God's mission, then the church continues to "be worried and distracted by many things."

In the name of Christ, our all in all.