

Martha and Mary prepare for Christmas

Lets be frank. The story just read, the story of Martha and Mary, from the gospel of Luke, is completely out of sequence in our Advent season. It has nothing to do chronologically with awaiting the birth of the messiah, that would have been our appointed text of the day. I have chosen it however because I think that it is a useful story for thinking about what is on all of our minds anyway, that is our attitude and our actions as get ready for the big day capital b capital d, Christmas.

I wont go as far as to try to superimpose the two stores, I did try that in a draft of this sermon and it seems too confusing, too many people at the birth scene, too many Mary, to keep track of. But the story of Martha and Mary does make sense, especially at Christmas time because we are often acting very much like these two women, and we have strands of each of these characters in us as we go about our advent Christmas season.

Lets look back at the story to see why. In Luke's story, Jesus has come for a visit to the house of Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. They two women are probably delighted to have Jesus as a guest, but each treats this special visitor in a different way. Martha rushes around to get the meal on the table and make sure everything is just right. Mary chooses to sit at Jesus feet and listen to his teaching. Martha becomes anxious and annoyed at her sister. She wants Mary's help and tells Jesus how annoyed she it. He says to her Martha, why are you so stressed out ? Why are you so troubled? Look at Mary, she is taking it easy, she has the better part. She is here listening to me. And no one shall take this leisure and this devotion from her.

Now one could make many a retort to Jesus at this point, especially anyone who has had to get food on the table for a crowd of hungry people. Any hostess knows that not easy, and to do it without breaking a sweat, well, that's even harder. And let's not even go into the possibilities of sibling rivalry or other psychological factors that might be in play in this triangle of Jesus, Martha and Mary.

And tongue in cheek, we might wonder if Jesus isn't biting the hand that feeds him. As it were.

But behind this practical aspect, the story is set up to point out two very different attitudes toward the tasks we are given, two very different ways of being in the world, that are manifest in many of us at Christmas. Some of us rush around frantically trying to get ready for this day and you know the drill, I don't have to tell you what is on our list to finish up this weekend and the count down to next Sunday night

More than one person has told me this week that they're just trying to get through, just trying to survive until Christmas. Last Wednesday, I spoke with an old college friend who said to me, "I was in church last Sunday and there was a sermon on waiting and waiting and waiting –you know a typical advent sermon, and all I could think of was, "yes I am waiting and waiting, waiting for this sermon to end so I can go shopping!" I daresay few are immune to the Christmas rush pressures that Martha so perfectly embodies by her rushing and stress even though she wasn't

preparing for Christmas and her story took place about 2000 years ago.

In a way, that's a comfort—we are all like Martha. And some of us aspire to be like that other Martha, Martha Stewart. That is not only do it all, but do it perfectly. So for some, Christmas isn't simply a lot of doing but it is a time when we demand that things look a certain way. Whether our inspiration is house beautiful or our own family traditions, the next door neighbor's decorations or the office mate who has already baked 10 dozen cookies, the aunt or bother who is so organized that all the gifts were bought last summer—all these comparisons prey on our minds.

Now this dream of beauty, of perfection, behind the image of Christmas is not all bad. I think it speaks to our longing for wholeness, for community, for family, for connection. There is a deep joy in receiving an unexpected gift or card, or from reconnecting with old and long lost friends or family, and for

spending time with loved ones. Christmas seems to hold out that possibility each year. But perhaps we miss some of these opportunities if we are like Martha in our story or our contemporary version, Martha Stewart, more caught up in the doing than the being.

And that is where Mary can help us get back to the basics. Mary sits at Jesus feet, she pays attention to his teaching, she is absorbed and alert and awake to what he is saying and who he is as a person. She is calm, she is focused and she listens. She has that sense of awe and inspiration that is the essence of prayer, not doing or asking but being.

Now, friends realistically, it is unlikely that we are all going to morph into wide eye contemplatives, or meditators, in the next week. And it might be hard to explain to our grandchildren that we didn't get their favorite and expected toy because we were caught up reading the bible or praying. We are going to do Christmas the way we do it and that is part of the fun. I do think that God

understands what we do, since Emmanuel, God –with-- us has had plenty of experience observing and participating in the human comedy. But as we do these things : is it possible to ask ourselves, what part am I playing here? Am I being frantic Martha, I really enjoying this experience or am I a slave to my own or another's expectations ? Am I subjecting myself to a tyranny of traditions that no long fit my life or my lifestyle? Or, most simply: am I happy, am I relaxed? If not, that's often a clue that we are in full Martha mode.

How to be in Mary mode ? How to stop the frenzy ? Its right there in the story. Sit at Jesus feet, listen to what he is saying. Quiet down. Wait and see what happens. If we do this and pay attention to this baby about to be born, to this experience of getting ready for Christ and not just trying to get through, we may in fact have more fun, be more relaxed and even joyful to discover that the inner peace we long for appears. And God may grace us with the sure knowledge that we have in Jesus words "chosen the better

part, which will not be taken from us.”

That is at least one take on the story be more like Mary, less like Martha.

However, it might be a mistake to see these two tendencies as mutually exclusive, one good, the other bad. I think the story can be read slightly differently in a way that shows us not only how to relax, but also to accept ourselves the way we are. Going back into the text, we see that the key passage is when Martha complains about her sister and makes the comment to Jesus, “don’t you see how I am rushing around, why can’t she help me ?” This is the issue, Martha wants her sibling to be just like her.

Haven’t we all been here ? wanting other people around us to be like us or to do things the way we want.?

Trying to control others or have them do our bidding never works for long, but we often put ourselves in that position. We say to ourselves: if only they would do what I want, or see it my way , or listen to my advice, then things would go as they should. Which is

just a subtle or not so subtle way of saying: I want it to go my way.

Here, Jesus defense of Mary is a clear rebuke to all of us who want to control the other person. When Martha attempts to co-opt Mary into domestic service , its as if Jesus says: “let her be herself. Its fine if you want to make a big dinner, and I’ll be glad to eat it, but don’t rope others into the preparation because you want things to be a certain way.”

How many times have we found ourselves in stressful situations because people have different agendas? Especially at Christmas, where there are so many unwritten hopes for unity built into the holiday myth. College students come home for the vacation want to stay up late and sleep all day, but parents want to visit and find out how the semester went. Husbands and wives want certain unspoken things from each othe and then get mad when the expectation isn’t met. In-laws provide endless possibilities for these types of scenarios, since they do not play by the same rules and

none of this is said out loud. And you have to learn the ropes, the playbook of the other team.

When I was a newlywed in Switzerland, my husband and I could never agree about the amount of food for a holiday party. I am Italian and the rule of thumb is that you have to have as much food at the end as at the beginning or you have not been a welcoming hostess. In my husband's family, and in the French traditions into which he was born and raised, if you had too much that meant that you were not a good manager of resources and it also meant that you would have to eat the leftovers for a week because no one took home doggy bags.

It took many Christmases before we learned how to give each other the space to be ourselves. And there is less stress now that we have agreed that I will do all the shopping and cooking ! And he will not criticize what I do.

Despite the incongruities of placing Martha and Mary in the Christmas season, we can learn from these two sisters. We learn that there is time and place for preparations. We learn that there is

way to learn from Jesus more directly, if we give ourselves the space to sit at his feet or contemplate the manger or whatever image we use to help ourselves be present to the gift of his love. And, we learn that we can respect the other people around us who find their own way to Bethlehem. For God calls us each in our own way, to the festive table, to God's heart, and home to ourselves. Amen