

The Best Part

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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Albany, N.Y.

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The late Henri Nouwen, in his book, *Bread for the Journey*, wrote: "A friend is that other person with whom we can share our solitude, our silence, and our prayer. With a friend, we don't have to say or do something special. With a friend we can be still and know that God is there with both of us."

Jesus had friends. Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus enjoyed a relationship with Jesus different from that of the disciples. Claiming two women as intimate friends was a most unusual relationship in Jesus' day and culture, and not that common in our own.

The story of Jesus' visit with his friends, Martha and Mary, which we hear as the Gospel this morning, is familiar: Martha fussing over the meal and Mary sitting with Jesus. One can imagine the clatter of dishes in the kitchen growing steadily louder until Martha's exasperation at working alone is audible. And finally, Martha, pulled in all directions by a dozen tasks, no longer able to contain her frustration, unable to bear it any more, comes to Jesus and her sister. She confronts their guest, their friend, and asks him to send Mary into the kitchen to help. She embarrasses her sister, she embarrasses their guest, and no doubt embarrasses herself. Jesus minces no words in response, calls her by name not just once, but twice, in a manner that sounds more like a parent than a friend: "Martha, Dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over trivial matters. Only one thing is essential, and Mary has chosen it. Leave her alone, and don't take it from her."

And with that challenge to Martha, the story abruptly ends. We have no idea what happened next. Were Martha's cheeks burning with embarrassment? Did she, in spite of her confusion, accept Jesus' invitation to sit with Mary at his feet? And as she listened to Jesus, did her racing heart slow down? Was she able to shake off the anxiety of the meal which must, by now, be burning or going to waste?

We don't know. But preachers have taken the story and run with it, trying to get into Martha's head to understand her passive-aggressive behavior in the kitchen, her compulsive obsession with trying to keep the household together, while her sister just, well, hangs around Jesus, apparently doing not much of anything so that nothing much gets done. And then the preacher suggests that, after all, don't we all have a bit of Martha in all of us? Don't we all find it easier to make a casserole for a grieving family that to offer a word of hope or comfort in Christ — easier to welcome a new neighbor with a fresh loaf of homemade bread rather than invite them to Church, to Liturgy and Eucharist and explain how it might enrich their lives?

Preachers have chastised us for being addicts to good works, obsessed with serving each other and the community around us, chastised us for repressing Mary's devotion to the good portion, the essential and needful thing — for not defending and not encouraging that which is suggested by the image of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, where we might be training in ways of developing our own intimacy with Christ and knowledge of God so that we can bring others to share what we experience. And then, rather than offending anyone, the preacher tries to pull it all together. The preacher tries to please everyone and put the two, Martha and Mary, in a balancing act with each other, and declares that their activities of doing and being are both needed, that we need to strike a balance between sitting and listening and going and serving, that, yes, we should make time to sit around on our salvation, as someone put it, and then, yes, scatter into the world and take our part in work and daily life.

Of course, we need both: to sit down with Jesus at table and feast on his work and promise, and then, thus nourished, put our hands and feet and hearts and minds to work on behalf of others. That homiletic approach somehow seems to make sense both of our world and our faith. It explains our motive, our reason for the good works and deeds of charity that we take such pride in doing and that is, in the end, its own reward.

The problem is, if we are honest with the Gospel text, the story as told in Luke doesn't seem to back that up. We need only one thing, Jesus cautions, and Mary has discovered what it is! So there is a sense in the story that, as hard as we try, we're never going to get it right.

If we, like Martha, err on the side of being too scheduled, too obsessed, trying to hold life together, we get blamed for ignoring what Jesus calls the better part, that which is essential and needful above all else, something which is never explained, except that it would seem to be about Jesus himself, his presence and his person. But what still nags us is: If, like Mary, we sit for too long with Jesus in our prayers and hymns for the sake of spiritual refreshment, nothing practical is going to get done. I suspect we want the story to carry more weight than it is able to bear.

Which brings us back to where we began: Mary and Martha and Jesus were friends. Not disciples or students being taught by this itinerant rabbi, not apostles being sent out to take his message next door, down the street and into the world, but friends who, as Nouwen reminds us, don't have to say or do anything special when it's enough just to be in each other's company and know God is there with you together, too. And while Jesus seems to chastise Martha for her preoccupation and her busyness at the same time extolling Mary for her leisurely and simple hospitality, it doesn't seem likely that any friend would impose such a divisive judgment between those he loved. No, whatever words passed between them were words of friendship, honest and sincere. The story, as we have it, gives no indication of Jesus' tone of delivery and the history of their long relationship. So what we hear (or read?) is largely out of context. It could be that what went down between them was a kind of good-natured kidding exchanged among friends, not a rigid moral distinction between the virtues of one sister over another.

Further, we know absolutely nothing of how Jesus happened to come to this friendship. (But I suspect it sort of just happened.) Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus were a gift to Jesus which is what certainly is the case for our best and dearest friends. They are the unlikely ones whose paths have crossed ours, the ones we would not choose, the ones who in some cases prove as awkward, even embarrassing, as they are enriching and lasting. They are folks we have met on the way. Sure, our friendships would be a lot easier if we could really control them, could pick and choose those who share our lives so intimately. Jesus might have chosen his friends more wisely, for his friendship with Martha and Mary probably did little to enhance his career or advance his agenda. Which suggests (doesn't it?) that the friends we need and, in some instances deeply desire, are likely very near at hand, where God has planted them in our way and has placed us in theirs.

Maybe our problem, if indeed we have a problem, is that we have difficulty accepting the gifts God holds out to us in others, in acknowledging the presence of Christ in them. And so our prayer is that God might give us the will to love, might open our hearts to hear and strengthen our hands to serve those who come to us. They remind us that God is very near, and that those prepared to love us are even now among us. Whoever they are, they aren't going to be perfect. And we will admire some things in them more than others, just as there are some things about us they will have to put up with. But we will love them just the same, just as Jesus loves us, for who we are and as we are: flawed, forgetful, compulsive, passive-aggressive, vane, often ungrateful. Jesus loves us in our activity and in our inaction, sometimes chastening and encouraging us as he needs to, supporting and commending us, too, in whatever ways are best for us. And we will try, God willing, in whatever ways we can, to be his friend as well, choosing like Mary, the best part — the essential thing which will not be taken from us.