16 C 2025

In the story before today’s Gospel, Jesus encountered a lawyer who wanted to know what to *do* to inherit everlasting life. The lawyer could recite the double commandment to love, but he does not know how to put it into action. Jesus deflected the lawyer’s combative attitude. Jesus instructed him, through the story of the Good Samaritan, on how to *do* love of God and love of neighbor: interior love of God from the heart is the energy and creativity of the outer action of loving the neighbor.

Today, in the Martha-Mary story, the lesson is similar. But Jesus takes this lesson in a different direction. Martha has no trouble *doing.* In fact, she is doing many things, but she is doing them without the one thing necessary. Her perception is misleading. The very situation she thinks is the problem—Mary’s sitting at the Lord’s feet, absorbing His words—is her only hope for productive and peaceful action. Jesus confronts Martha, pointing out that she should rethink the situation. Mary should not join her. Martha should join Mary. The one thing necessary is that Mary’s realized love of God is the energy and creativity of effective action in the world.

Martha and Mary, together, show us how we must live in the world. As sisters, they symbolize side-by-side realities that are meant to be together. Separating them diminishes both. We are fond of playing one against one other, but the real task is to discover their proper relationship. It’s not a matter of which one is more important. Rather, it’s a matter of how they complement each other, about discovering their mutuality.

Mary is sketched as a contemplative, a dedicated disciple absorbing Jesus’ every word. Her inner activity is to hold Jesus’ word in the heart with steady perseverance, then letting it overflow into the world. Martha is a representative of outer activity. It is disengaged from its inner grounding and is scattered in multiple tasks. She speaks in a resentful tone and voices a complaint. She sizes up the situation because there are too many tasks. Her problem is the amount of work she has to do, and she is frantic. Behold, the beginning of multitasking.

But Martha has a solution. However overwhelmed, Mary has left her to do all the work by herself. “Many hands make light work” has not been invented yet. So Martha asks the Lord to tell Mary to help her. Of course, this would mean that Jesus would do her bidding and tell Mary to help her on Martha’s terms--abandoning her inner activity of meditating on the Lord’s teachings, and join the outer world of multiple tasks. Martha’s strategy is to make the two sisters one, turning Mary into a clone of Martha. She wants to collapse the integrated world of Mary-Martha into the one-dimensional world of Martha-Martha.

*“But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing…”* -- the connection to God. The better part is the good part, the energy of effective action. The solution is not for Mary to become Martha, or for Martha to become Mary. When we discover their mutuality, our daily task of living is to relate them to one another for the benefit of both. After all, they are sisters. Then we can understand our consciousness is to be both—contemplative and active—being in the outer company of people with the inner company of God. This is captured in the phrase, *“being in the world but not of the world.”*

Consciousness is the backdrop of this teaching. Symbolized by how they live in the world, they are capable being here or not there, there and not here, or neither here nor there. One of our friars, upon his visit from South America, is forever quoted when he said, “we’re not all here because we’re not all there.” His decades-old statement lives in the friars’ consciousness to this very day. And so, I speak to its relevance here.

People can be here and not there. They can be there and not here. Or they can be neither here nor there, as the friar said. But the final pride of place belongs to the Mary-Martha ideal of being both here and there, a consciousness as something to be achieved by ordinary working people. Christian tradition considers it: *“contemplation in action.”* It reflects a dual consciousness, a problem of how Mary and Martha are integrated. As Franciscans, we learn to *“pray without ceasing,”* to maintain a continuous, conscious connection with God throughout the day. It’s an awareness of God’s presence, a willingness to turn to Him in all circumstances. The remedy is divine reality. God is not one more object of human contemplation. God and human effort are not on the same level.

And so, we do not have to interiorly think about God while doing exterior things, but using our inner disposition toward the divine to discern the lure of God in every situation and cooperate with it to make that situation all it can be. God’s grace sustains our personal being and a summons that calls us to cooperate in building a just world. When we wake up to this revelation that all things exist and are suffused by divine life, we wake up to our identity as Mary-Martha.

