

PROPER 11 – C – 2010

LUKE 10:38-42

Erma Bombeck was an Arizona gal, who before she died of cancer, had a syndicated column which I regularly read. In her book, *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I doing Here in the Pits*, she told of two moments in her husband's life.

There was the time when the children were growing up. Her husband surveyed the muddy patches in their back yard and found himself wondering, "Will the grass ever come back and fill in those spots trampled down by the kids?" Then years later, when the children were grown and had left home to do their own thing, her husband looked out at the beautiful green lawn, immaculate from lack of use and wondered out loud, "Will the kids ever come back?"

Some parts of life are temporary, some are eternal. Wisdom knows the difference. Do we enjoy the time we have with our kids, our parents, our friends – do we make time for what is eternal -- or do we continue to worry about being sure the lawn is green or the dishes are washed or whatever else we think needs to be done at that exact moment? This is the fundamental issue in the story of Mary and Martha.

Most of us know today's gospel story. And I'm certain most of us can relate to it. How many times have you felt like Martha? Even you men? Busy, busy, busy. Too much to do and not enough time to do it. And how many of us wish we could be like Mary, sitting quietly, relaxing, listening and learning, not worrying about all the things we think we should be doing?

Imagine you are Martha or Max, if you're a man. Martha, or Max, is preparing dinner. You've been looking forward to your friends who have come to visit and you're excited about preparing a really good meal for them. They need a good hot, home cooked meal and you're just the person to put it together.

You've been to the market and chosen the best fruits and vegetables and have selected the most tender cut of meat. The meat is slowly cooking and you check it every few minutes to make certain it won't be overdone. The vegetables still need to be prepared but because you took so long cleaning and making sure your house looks nice, you didn't have enough time to get the vegetables going before your friends arrived. And now everything is taking longer than you expected.

You try to work faster but as that old saying goes, "haste makes waste." And as you're pulling a pan out of the cupboard, you break a dish. But you don't have time to pick up the pieces because the lamb stew is boiling over and so you run over to pull it off the stove and your fingers get burned as you pick up the hot handle.

Suddenly you remember the bread in the oven. The loaves are ready to come out so you run over to the oven to get the bread before it burns. And then as you turn away from the oven with the hot bread in your hands, you spot one of your family members – someone who could be helping you – sitting, talking with your friends. Hasn't anyone noticed how hard you're working? The stew pot is boiling over and so are you.

I'm sure this is exactly the scenario in our gospel story. Mary was doing exactly what Martha wanted to be doing, quietly listening to Jesus tell his wonderful stories about God's kingdom. Martha doesn't confront Mary. She does what most of us would do, she speaks to Jesus because she thinks he will understand and put everything right. There's no doubt in Martha's mind that Jesus will tell Mary that her desire to listen is admirable but she needs to realize her first duty is to help her sister. But Jesus doesn't say what Martha expects him to say.

Instead, Jesus addresses Martha and all of us who have been caught up in a similar situation. Jesus speaks with love and compassion. Jesus tells Martha and all of us that we have become worried and distracted by what is of temporary importance. He doesn't criticize what we are doing or the way we've chosen to serve him. What he criticizes is what is in our heart and mind.

I can't help but wonder why Martha and those of us who find ourselves in the same type of situation, keep clattering around the kitchen, getting more and more angry and feeling more and more put upon and more and more unappreciated. Why didn't Martha and why don't we just take the pot off of the stove and go sit down at the feet of Jesus and listen and enjoy his presence? Why can't we learn to relax and be with God?

It seems to me there are three reasons why Martha and all of us find ourselves being overextended in the kitchen, or office, or the garage or wherever – you name the place. What starts out as fun isn't fun anymore. What started out to be a gift of love becomes drudgery and we find ourselves getting annoyed and angry.

First, all of us have received messages, from all directions, all of our lives, which tell us, if we want acceptance and approval from other people, we have to earn it. We have to produce. We have to be good at something. From our earliest childhood, we are judged by our accomplishments. Our value depends on the grades on our report cards, if we're on a winning team, or if we get paid a big salary. We've been taught non-producers get left behind. There are a lot of us who find our identity and self-esteem so tied up in our work and our activities that we feel guilty and restless if we're not busy.

Church workers are notorious Marthas. We start out enjoying doing work for the church. We know what we are doing is because we love God. Then we let our constant busyness take over and the joy ceases. I wonder if when the joy of serving God through what we are doing has faded that just perhaps -- God is saying to us, "Relax, I don't have anything for you to do today. Go back to bed. Do something for yourself. Read a book. Go for a walk. Enjoy the day I have given you."

A second reason that we seem to become Marthas, may be that all of us seem to think we are indispensable. We think we are the only ones who can do what needs to be done in the right way.

Several years after I began teaching, I had become bogged down with everything I thought needed to be done to make, not only my classroom the best teaching environment for kids, but I was volunteering for all sorts of committees to make sure my school was the best school in our district. My principal finally sat me down in his office and told me to slow down that I wasn't indispensable. That if I thought I was, I should stick my finger in a bucket of water. When I pulled my finger out of the water, if the hole from my finger was still there, I was indispensable, if not, relax, someone else could do the job.

My busyness and my agenda had gotten in the way of the big picture – just as Martha's motivation of fixing a great meal had been lost and had turned into irritation and anger.

The third reason that seems to cause people to shift into a "Martha mode" is that we want to be kind, generous and loving but we want to do it as Frank Sinatra sang, "my way." We want to be in control. It isn't that Jesus doesn't want us to work hard and be responsible. But Jesus wanted Martha and wants all of us to be filled with that quiet sense of joy that comes from serving God in whatever tasks we are being called to do. Jesus wants us to remember that whatever way we choose to serve God, our service should be based upon and filled with love. And when it is, we'll find joy and peace in whatever we are doing.

Jesus told Martha on that long ago day, and is telling us three things. One, Jesus is telling us that our worth is not tied up with our work, with our keeping busy all the time. And two, he is telling us that none of us is indispensable. We don't have to do everything ourselves. And third, we don't have to do whatever needs to be done, our way. Jesus is letting us know, whatever and however we choose to serve God, it should be done with love and joy in our hearts.

There's no doubt in my mind, that if we all can remember these three things, life will become what God wants it to be for all of us. Our lives will be filled with joy and love,

even among the pots and pans of our lives, whatever they may be. Our life will be concerned not so much for what is temporary but for what is eternal. And we'll have time to know the difference.

Amen.

**Sermon by the
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