

## Practical Spirituality

Mary and Martha, the sisters who lived in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem, were very close to Jesus. They were more than friends, disciples, believers. We know about their relationship with Jesus from today's story in Luke's Gospel and from John's narrative. In fact John writes, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and their brother, Lazarus." (John 11:5)

We don't know when or how the sisters met Jesus. What we do know is that they believed Jesus was the Lord, the Christ, the Messiah.

As we continue our Sunday Gospel readings from Luke's special section, we continue to learn about discipleship, following Jesus. Mary and Martha's examples must have been very important for the early Church. Luke puts this short teaching about them right after the important parable of the Good Samaritan.

John tells us about the sisters and their brother, Lazarus, near the end of his narrative. The healing of Lazarus from the dead is the last of the seven miracles, signs, in John's Gospel. The dinner Martha and Mary host for Jesus is the day before Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph, what we celebrate on Palm Sunday. Martha serves at this dinner. Mary anoints Jesus and wipes his feet with her hair! What devotion! Judas complains about wasting money on the expensive oil Mary uses.

Mary and Martha provide extreme examples of practicality and spirituality. Martha shows us the need for common sense, hard work, serving, acting. Mary shows us the need for devotion, meditation, listening.

Too often today's Gospel has been simplified to have Mary's example of contemplation be seen as the "better part." When we place this story with the stories in John, we see that the sisters represent "both/and" rather than "either/or." Both action and contemplation are necessary for discipleship.

Jesus' harsh words to Martha in today's Gospel remind us that our lives as Christians need to be focused on what is important. We can be distracted too easily. We can let anxiety overwhelm us. Anxiety is a huge problem in our society.

Studies now show that anxiety has replaced depression as the leading mental health issue for our young people. Just 3 years ago a poll taken by incoming college freshmen showed that almost 50% of them felt "overwhelmed" by all they had to do.

Mary and Martha show us the way to focus, pay attention, have hope, be devoted to Christ. They are given their own feast day in the church calendar – July 29<sup>th</sup>.

My last Sunday at Grace is just 10 weeks away. Since announcing my retirement, I have received a great deal of encouragement and support. People often say, "Congratulations!" But I know there's also sadness, grief, perhaps some confusion, anxiety, even anger. Mary and Martha show us the way to deal with all change, all challenges, all pain, even death.

When I was in seminary many years ago, I learned of the amazing work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross. She worked with terminally ill children and wrote a book based upon her experiences, On Death and Dying. She identified 5 stages children went through as they learned that they were dying: 1. Denial, 2. Bargaining, 3. Anger, 4. Depression, 5. Acceptance. We can see these same stages as we deal with grief, with change, with the loss of someone we love.

I also found these words she wrote – they speak of the witness of Mary and Martha. They speak to us:

You will not “get over” the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor would you want to.

Amen