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Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Proper 11, Yr C

" Mary ... sat at the Lord's feet ↓ and listened "



The scene is almost formulaic, isn't it? Almost the stuff of a TV sitcom:

Scene One: exterior, on the town square. A mysterious yet charismatic visitor has just rolled into town, and the two sisters who share a house over on Herod Street are intrigued. They want to get to know Him better ... to hear more of the good things He has to say. As evening's approaching, one sister invites Him home for dinner.

Scene Two: the kitchen of the sisters' modest home. Realizing the simple fare the sisters have laid in for their own meal is too pedestrian to serve a guest, Martha busies herself preparing extra dishes ... and then goes out to buy another loaf of bread and a few fish. Racing home from these errands, Martha scans the house, in dismay: The floors need sweeping, the cats need brushing, the table needs setting and the lamps all need to be trimmed—and so, dropping her purchases on a table, Martha now sets herself to *these* tasks, as well. Meanwhile, all this time, her sister Mary, seemingly oblivious to all of Martha's efforts, has been sitting comfortably at their guest's feet, out in the living room, basking in His presence and hanging on His every word.

Tired, hot and stressed—there are loose strands of hair falling from beneath her cap, and the sleeves of her dress are shoved up almost to her shoulders—Martha suddenly loses her patience and her composure. She storms out into the living room to complain about the unfairness of her doing *everything* while Mary does *nothing*. Thinking she has a sure ally in their wise guest, Martha asks Him to excuse Mary so they can get dinner on the table sometime before midnight.

And here, we pause the action, for a moment. If this were a typical 1950s or 60s sitcom, at this point, the avuncular, paternalistic guest would crinkle his eyes; cast a benignant look at Martha; take the pipe from his mouth; and gently chide Mary for not helping her sister. He'd tell her to skedaddle on out into the kitchen to give Martha a hand—that there'd be plenty of time for all three of them to talk, once supper was on the table.

↓ But when the last-minute dinner guest isn't being played by Robert Young or Fred MacMurray, but is, in fact, Jesus Himself, the hackneyed sitcom script goes out the window: For while *we* are accustomed to thinking in terms of *fairness*,¹ *He* instead privileges *goodness*. "It is *good* for Mary to be here with Me," He tells the harried Martha. "Of the many things you both *could* be doing right now, the good² thing"—some translations say, the most important thing—"is to be with Me and hear all I have to tell you. Anything else that needs doing will get done, in good time."

¹ While Jesus is always concerned about charity and justice, He doesn't set much store by human conceptions of fairness. In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), at the end of the work day, all of the laborers are paid the same wages, whether they've been working since 9:00 AM or 4:00 PM. Jesus' point is that the forgiving mercy and saving love of God is all-sufficient. When everyone will receive all they'll ever need, it's superfluous to argue that you should have received more than someone else.

² The Greek here is slightly tricky. The adjective is ἀγαθός, which means "good" or "virtuous." In form, it is a positive, not a comparative, so the English translation "better"—with its implications that Martha has done poorly—isn't exactly correct. On the other hand, ἀγαθός does carry a sense of something that is profitable or commendable or useful, *i.e.*, as

On the one hand, Jesus' response to Martha is a tough message for us busy, busy people to hear. Many of us have piled up *lots* of duties and obligations. Our weekly agendas are, like Martha's, chock full of family, work, civic and volunteer commitments that well nigh exhaust us. ↓ And, in truth, I don't think Jesus ... Whose own ministry was a non-stop three-year trek all over ancient Palestine—teaching, preaching to, feeding and healing thousands ... finds fault with our efforts. Martha is, after all, simply striving to provide Jesus the hospitality that her culture, which prizes welcoming the stranger, dictates.

But, ... Jesus continues, ... your life can't *only* be scurrying about—can't *only* be feeding and caring for others. You have to let *Me* feed *you*, as well. Regardless of whether Mary's choice is *fair*, Jesus tells Martha, it is *good* ... because she is welcoming Me into her heart and letting My words sound in her soul.

As sisters and housemates, Martha and Mary rightly share equal responsibility for the pre-dinner to-do list. But whereas Martha sees an inflexible set of commitments that she must complete *before* she can spend any time with Jesus—sees an obstacle standing *between* her and Jesus ... Mary, on the other hand, appreciates the goodness of making room for Jesus *within* her busy-ness: of letting His words *season* her work ... of folding His love *into* her labors. Mary *will*, no doubt, eventually excuse herself and join Martha in the kitchen. But just think of the looks on their respective faces ... of the thoughts running through their respective heads ... as they serve up the meal: Mary, filled and fueled by Christ's blessing and power; and Martha, running on spiritual fumes and wondering whether she'll be able to keep her eyes open after they sit down to eat.

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"Pray without ceasing," St Paul famously wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thes 5:17), and I think this is something of what Jesus has in mind when He commends Mary's choice to linger at His feet. Jesus *knows* that we have real, practical responsibilities: livings to earn and families to care for; commitments to honor and roles (both voluntary and assigned) to perform. And He doesn't tell us to ignore or shirk them. Rather, He suggests that we consciously *invite Him into each new task*, through prayer—that we sprinkle several quick, quiet moments of lingering at Jesus' feet throughout the rhythm of our days:

- As we rise each new day, thank Him for its gift
- As we make breakfast or take the dog out, invite Him to guide us this day
- As we prepare to eat, express to Him our gratitude
- As we drive to work or our first errand, ask Him to hallow our labors
- As we prepare for a difficult meeting or tough conversation, seek His counsel
- As we encounter people who are surly or uncoöperative, call down His peace
- As we regret a lost temper or an unkind word, ask His forgiveness
- As we realize that yet another day will end with tasks left undone, hear His "all will be well"
- As we get ready to sleep, bid His protection

Jesus isn't just *a* part of our lives, but, as He tells Martha, the *good*—the *best*—part. The guidance we get ... the blessing we're given ... the comfort we receive ... the love we feel ... when,

opposed to something else that isn't (or may not be). I like one commentator's suggested translation into modern idiomatic English: "Mary's made the right choice."

like Mary, we make a habit of lingering at His feet and listening, several times a day: these are His gracious wish for Martha—and for each of us, as well.



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