

Grace Episcopal Church  
6th Sunday after Pentecost 2022  
Lauds – Morning Prayer  
Rev. Brian C Justice

Genesis 18.1-10  
Psalm 15  
Colossians 1.15-28  
Luke 10.38-42

“Only One Thing”  
The Non-Duality of Action and Contemplation

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In the Name of God:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
in whom all is reconciled.  
Amen.

In the long history of biblical exegesis, this brief and enigmatic scene recorded in the 10th chapter of Luke’s gospel has generated both assumptions and interpretations.

Let us begin by asking three questions.

First, where are we?

Second, who are these two sisters?

Third, what does this mean?

Because many commentators have linked this passage to John 11, in which Lazarus is raised from the dead, the assumption is that the location is the village of Bethany just southeast of Jerusalem and the two sisters are Martha and Mary, siblings of Lazarus.

Curiously, Luke mentions neither Bethany nor Lazarus, so the location and the sisters are identified only if we do what neither Luke nor John does: join these two texts together.

But more importantly, what does this text mean?

What are we supposed to understand in the story of Jesus at the house of Martha and Mary?

Let us recall what happened.

Jesus, the disciples, and any number of unnamed followers “entered a certain village.”

“A woman named Martha welcomed” Jesus “into her home.”

“Martha had a sister named Mary who sat at the Lord’s feet and *listened to what he was saying.*”

“But Martha was *distracted* by her many tasks.”

In exasperation, she approached Jesus and said, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left *me* to do all of the work?” ...

Jesus responds, “Martha, Martha you are *worried* and *distracted* by many things, there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken from her.”

Hmmm ... what does this mean? (And, incidentally, where is Lazarus?)

In the exegesis of this text over the centuries, one dominant interpretation has emerged. Many commentators have assigned metaphorical meaning to the sisters:

Martha represents the Way of Action.

Mary represents the Way of Contemplation.

And because Jesus admonishes Martha and says Mary “has chosen the better part” then the lesson, according to this interpretation, is that Contemplation is superior to Action.

What Mary is doing is better than what Martha is doing.

Then, those who espouse this view often bolster their argument by quoting a text like Matthew 4.4 in which Jesus rejects the temptation of the devil saying, “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

This interpretation would seemingly link Martha and the Way of Action to worldly cares, to work, to busy-ness, to materialism, to “distraction” and “worry” ... but Mary and the Way of Contemplation to worship, to devotion, to faithfulness to God, to prayer, to “the better part.”

Therefore, we are to conclude that Mary and the Way of Contemplation are *clearly* superior to Martha and the Way of Action and you and I are *less than* if we do not renounce Action and take up Contemplation.

To me, this is an incredibly disappointing and discouraging interpretation of the text.

It is a false dichotomy, an unnatural dissection, an unreal duality.

The Way of Action and the Way of Contemplation cannot be separated ... just like Martha and Mary cannot be separated.

They are sisters!

They are related!

They go together no matter what ...

And so do Action and Contemplation.

The Way of Action includes many things:

1. the tasks of daily life to maintain a household such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, washing dishes, paying bills
2. the work of a livelihood, a job, a career, a profession to earn what is necessary

AND

3. the ministry to which we pledged ourselves in our Baptismal Covenant: continuing in the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, and the prayers; resisting evil and repenting; proclaiming the Good News of God by word *and* example; seeking and serving Christ in all persons and loving our neighbor as ourselves; striving for justice and peace among all people; and respecting the dignity of every human being

This is the work of discipleship. This is the Way of Action. And to this, *all of us* are called.

But, at the same time, we are also called to the Way of Contemplation. For contemplation is also the work of discipleship.

Like Mary, in contemplation, we behold and adore God: that is, we praise and worship God. We love the One who is most worthy of our Love.

And this we do individually through prayer and reading and reflection and meditation as well as communally through the Liturgy and the Eucharist.

So no ... the Way of Action and the Way of Contemplation cannot be separated ... just like Martha and Mary cannot be separated.

And let's remember where Luke places this story ... right after the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And that is all about Action! ... Right?

If there is a criticism of Martha, it is that she is "distracted" and "worried" by her tasks. And this is the challenge for us: while we are called to the Way of Action as a necessary dimension of our lives and our discipleship, we cannot let the work diminish our contemplation of God. We cannot let it get the better of us. We can't lose God in it.

We must find God *in* the work. God is there! We dedicate ourselves to God, we give our effort to God, and then our work *is* our prayer and our Action *is* our Contemplation.

In 529 AD, St Benedict established his monastery at Monte Cassino. The *Rule of St Benedict* governs that community and all Benedictine communities. In fact, the *Rule of St Benedict* became the model for most of the monastic orders in the West. And the whole *Rule* is built upon this: Ora et Labora, Pray and Work.

At times, we may feel like our prayer and our work are two different things, but with intentionality, with mindfulness, with practice, with grace, they become one. If we set our hearts and minds upon God *like Mary*, then we may do the work that is ours to do *like Martha*.

The Action of washing dishes and folding laundry and working at the office and running errands and replying to email and watering the garden and feeding the dog and brushing teeth and mowing the lawn *is* our Contemplation.

St Nicholas Kabasilas, a 14th century theologian and mystic in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, said,

Everyone may continue to exercise their art or profession. The general may continue to command, the farmer to till the soil, the workman to pursue his or her craft. No one need desist from his or her usual employment. It is not necessary to retire into the desert, or to eat unaccustomed food, or to dress differently, or to ruin one's health, or to do anything reckless; for it is quite possible to practice continual contemplation in one's home without giving up any of one's possessions.

What finally makes this possible? The love and grace of God as manifest in Christ. St Paul explains in today's reading from Colossians:

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible... *in him all things hold together* ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased *to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven...*

Yes! Through Christ all things are reconciled and brought together ... all things become one.

Heaven and Earth.  
The Church and the World.  
Action and Contemplation.  
Martha and Mary.

Jesus told the sisters, "There is need of only one thing."

And it is ours. It has been given to us.

Thank God.

Amen.