

“Worried and distracted”

Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things... I am not sure I can think of a better description for most of us here today than Jesus' description of Martha. Increasing gun violence in America; deep divisions of race and class; terrorist activity all over the world, in places we all once thought were safe; a presidential election with potentially disastrous consequences; an attempted military coup in an important NATO country...

And that's just what's going on “out there” in the world – everyone here has other, more personal concerns. Some are grieving the loss of a loved one, for example. And when you're grieving for your father or sister or child or husband or wife..., the worries and distractions out there in the world, no matter how great they are, just can't compare to the worries and distractions churning inside yourself.

Others are struggling with marital problems, or with a disease, or with financial problems that could change everything.... Jesus' description of Martha as “worried and distracted” probably describes many of us much of the time. And by contrast, Mary, he says, has chosen the better part that will never be taken away from her.

In this morning's Gospel lesson, I'm convinced that Jesus is not commending the contemplative life over the life of active service. In fact, Jesus himself would make it clear that he was one who came “not to be served, but to serve.” But the kind of service Jesus felt called to give required him to regularly leave the crowds and find “a lonely place apart” where he could be still in God's presence, where he could close his eyes, take a deep breath, and collect himself, come back to his soul and the Presence of the Loving God who was always with him. This is the better part that will never be taken away from any of us, but we all need such times of withdrawal in silent prayer if meaningful service is going to be possible.

Because it is our worries and distractions that remove us from the loving God who never leaves us. And this is what happened to Martha. Serving others is central to our life as Christians, but when we are worried and distracted, our serving becomes all about US. In her one small complaint, Martha seemed singularly focused on **herself**: “Don't you care that my sister has **left me** to do all the work **by myself**? Tell her to **help me**.”

And Jesus' response is that the one necessary thing, that has to precede all else, is just what Mary is doing – the only way to serve without worry and distraction that devolve into selfishness, is to follow Mary's example, and Jesus' example, and learn how to be still receptive in the Lord's presence. Mary has chosen “the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” It will never be taken away from any of us, either. The challenge is to stay present to it.

If there was ever a busy person who might have been prone to worry and distraction, overwhelmed from time to time with the constant overload of too much work in a distracting environment,... it was Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Volunteers with the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta regularly reported how amazed they were at the schedule she kept, from 4:30 in the morning until 9:30 at night. And right in the middle of it all, with the constant noise and stench of that overcrowded and impoverished city, Mother Teresa and her sisters took over an hour a day sitting still and silent before the blessed Sacrament of Jesus' body in the Communion bread.

One volunteer wrote that one day when he was passing by the chapel, he saw Mother Teresa kneeling there in silent prayer, gazing at the bodily presence of Jesus in the Sacrament, with her head tilted just slightly to one side, in what seemed to him to be a kind of loving adoration.

And then later that same day, as so many more gaunt, dying people were brought through the doors to be lovingly bathed by the sisters and then gently wrapped in clothes for their last hours of life, this same volunteer noticed Mother Teresa kneeling in exactly the same posture that she had had in prayer before the sacrament, but now she was next to the cot of a dying man whose body more nearly resembled a skeleton, and her head was tilted in exactly the same way, only now it was resting on the dying man's chest.

When Mother Teresa was asked at one point why she took so much time for prayer in an environment of such desperate poverty and need, she said this:

We pray like this every day, she said, "because we find that through our daily Holy Hour our love for Jesus becomes more intimate, our love for each other more understanding, and our love for the poor more compassionate."

In our world today, is there anything more important than this? Is there anything more needful than this sort of intimacy with Jesus, this loving understanding for each other, and this more compassionate love for the poor?

During World War II, my home church of St. John's in Knoxville, Tennessee, decided to put out racks of votive candles for people's use during the week. At that time, the idea of using votive candles seemed inappropriate or even scandalous to many Episcopalians – they were too Roman Catholic and didn't belong in Episcopal churches. But people were worried and distracted during WW II. They were worried about loved ones fighting overseas, worried about their children and spouses. They were worried about the atrocities and devastation that were being reported in the newspapers, and distracted by what all this might mean for the world. They needed to DO something, and entering a church to light a candle as a symbol of their prayer was at least something they could DO.

And so throughout each day, more and more people would stop into the St. John's Church, Knoxville during their lunch break, or after work, or in the midst of their errands and shopping. They would step off the busy downtown streets and out of the worries and distractions of their everyday lives, into the cool, darker, and silent space of the church. And one of the first things

they would see when they entered were scores of flickering votive candles, a sign that they were not alone, that many other people were praying with concerns just like theirs. And they could settle into a pew or onto a kneeling cushion and collect themselves in the deepest truth that will never be taken away from us – God with us, God all around us, God within us, God loving and assuring us that all our lives are in His hands.

And then they could go back out into their daily lives, perhaps with something like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, or the Prayer of St. Francis, or the Serenity Prayer sounding quietly again in their hearts:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.

In our worrisome and distracting world today, I can't think of a more important antidote than this kind of ministry of daily returning to God, returning to the one thing that will never be taken away from us and that will always be there to guide and comfort us.

Some of you saw the photograph published last week of a slender, young black woman, Ieshia Evans, a nurse from Pennsylvania, standing alone, calm and erect, in a long flowing dress on a street in Baton Rouge, LA, as police in full riot gear rushed towards her. Ieshia's calm poise and composure seemed to show that although she was empty handed and completely defenseless, she knew she was protected by the rock of our salvation. This is what we all need to recover, and this is why I hope and believe we might just be entering a time of deepening spiritual renewal and conviction.

Which is why, beginning tomorrow, you will see at the Grove Avenue sidewalk entrance to our church campus an attractive sign inviting people to "Come in. Be still. Light a candle. Say a prayer. Go in peace."

Because what we know is that Martha's "worry and distraction about many things" describes much of our world right now. And our hope is that people throughout each day will come in here, perhaps touch the holy water in the baptismal font and remember who they are, remember their true life in God, and then settle into a chair or pew, perhaps near the Sacramental Presence of Christ for a time of healing prayer, and finally leave with the Peace of God and the courage of their convictions.