

Holy Simplicity at the House of Bethany

Date: July 20, 2025

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Genesis 18.1-14

Psalm 15

Colossians 1.21-29

Luke 10.38-42

Opening

One does not cast vision for a parish in the middle of July, not with the travel season at its peak. Yet here I am looking at a story from Luke's Gospel that has great significance for our parish. Now if I were looking for the best opportunity to cast vision for our parish, I'd aim for August 10th, after school has begun, when we're gathered for our combined anniversary service as one church.

But the lectionary has led us to the house of Bethany regardless of the time or season. It may help you to know that this story from Mary and Martha's home has been near my heart since the springtime; in fact, it was a central story going farther back to my sabbatical last year. When I taught the formation course on discerning your Kingdom vocation in April and May, this story was continually before me. Mary and Martha's encounter with Jesus has shaped my rector's report to the Vestry for the last three months.

So I begin with this background, a local retrospective, with this Gospel story instead of a an exposition or interpretation. I won't unpack a ministry vision from this story, either. Instead, I want you to know this story has deep significance for us in this season of ministry at Apostles.

Many churches, pastors, and lay leaders focus their energy and resources on *what* they should be doing in ministry. Churches must do this, reflecting on what we've done in the past, what we are doing now, what God calls us to do in days to come.

But in the attention given to what we ought to be doing, American Christians easily lose the all important question—*how* should we be doing ministry? What kind of rhythms and pace ought we have? How do we harmonize the active work of ministry and the contemplative call to prayer? How should we be doing ministry?

It's not a vision sermon today. But it is a day to share some important topics and themes from the house of Bethany for our life at Apostles. For these are questions not only for our collective life, how Apostles does ministry. These are topics and discussions for our homes, our family rhythms, our calendars.

Yes, the lectionary works with divine providence as we resume normal routines and rhythms with August coming round the corner. Cross the threshold once more and enter the house of Bethany, the home of Mary and Martha, and learn from the Lord how he would order our families, our homes, our lives.

The Anxiety and Trouble of Many Things

Now before we speak about Martha's errors, let us speak of her virtues. A detail few notice about this story: it was Martha who invited Jesus to come inside the family home; to cross the threshold of their home to be welcomed as honored guest. Without Martha's welcome, Mary could not have sat at the feet of Jesus.

But once the Lord crossed the threshold of the house at Bethany, Martha crossed over into the arena of anxious distractions. The anxiety and trouble of *many things* consumes Martha. It is not *what* Martha is doing, it is *how* she works that brings anxiety. Hers are not dishonorable activities. In fact, hospitality is one of the holiest activities one can do. Consider the reading we heard from Genesis, how the act of hospitality and serving is, in fact, an encounter with the angel of the Lord!

When the Lord corrects Martha, he does not correct her for serving, for the gift of hospitality. When Jesus corrects Martha, he does so *gently*, saying her name twice: 'Martha, Martha...' Then the Lord addresses Martha's error—not serving, but allowing herself to be distracted, anxious, and troubled by *many things*.

In Christian tradition, we identify Martha with practical things and Mary with prayerful things; Martha represents the active life, Mary the contemplative life. But in this story, the two sisters represent another contrast: Martha is concerned with *many things* while Mary is concerned with the *one thing necessary*.

Service, hospitality, practical life—these tasks are *not* the problem. It is the volume of things that has overwhelmed Martha's spirit. Or, it is her attitude to the overwhelm that holds Martha's heart captive. Martha has not resisted the pull of the practical. Of practical needs there will be no end.

What do productivity experts say is the reward for completing tasks and responding to all emails? More emails and more tasks, not less.

I will pray when all the piles are sorted and the lists are complete. Maybe, but maybe not. Because in the sorting of various piles and completing checklists one discovers *more* things that need doing. The siren call of practical needs will always blare louder than the call to prayer. This is the anxiety and trouble of *many things*.

In the frenzy and burden of *many things*, Jesus teaches the way of his kingdom, which is the way of simplicity.

'One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion.' Martha was called not only to repentance, but to a conversion of sorts. To change her mind about tackling many things, and learn what is *the one thing necessary*; to learn the Jesus way of simplicity.

As I have said in years past reflecting on this story, Martha's work was not wrong, it was simply disordered. Prayer, listening to Jesus, attentiveness to his presence—these activities come first. The

spiritual life of a house puts the work of the house in order. Prayer orders productivity, not the other way round.

‘Prefer nothing to the work of God,’ wrote St. Benedict in his Rule. By ‘the work of God,’ St. Benedict meant worship and prayer. Thomas Merton wrote about his life as a Benedictine monk saying that no matter where one was working, whether in the kitchen, a field, or a workshop, when the bells of prayer ring, each monk leaves his task, regardless of the task or process, and begins walking to the Nave.

St. Porphyrios writes of a similar tradition among Orthodox nuns who cease their work when they hear the bells and pray the Jesus Prayer right where they are. The saint said

In practice this is difficult. But do you know wonderful it is to be watering the garden and, as soon as you hear the bell, to kneel down?...For ten minutes we say with intensity, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.’ all together, wherever we happen to be, as one person, united with Christ in prayer of the heart, and then we continue our work.¹

We are not monks, we live in the world. We don’t have the same rule of life and prayer as monks, though the same principle of prayer ordering work is one we can adopt in our daily lives. Every time I have visited a monastery I find a great paradox: the most peaceful and prayerful places are also some of the most productive places I’ve visited. One of the loveliest and most productive gardens I have ever seen was tended by a monk who prayed all 150 psalms everyday. There is a Christian way of productivity without haste and anxiety. Hurry is the pace of hell, not heaven. There is a way of calm productivity, but the way of prayer has to put all work in order.

The Aroma of Mary’s Devotion

Mary chooses the good portion, the one thing necessary, the essential work of the household. To enter the presence of God and listen to his voice. When Jesus gently corrects Martha’s distracted and anxious spirit, he discloses to her a secret about Mary’s devotion—this one thing necessary—brings calm and order to the whole household. Mary’s devotion sets the tone for the rhythm of the household.

This is not the only occasion where Mary’s spirit fills the house. This is the same Mary—Mary of Bethany—who anointed the feet of Jesus just seven days before his crucifixion. Mary poured an entire container of expensive perfume over Jesus. And St. John said that ‘the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.’²

Mary seemed to have the same response to money as she did with time—these values were meaningless to her compared with the presence of the Lord. As Mary took no thought for other tasks when the Lord first visited their home, Mary took no thought for the expense of pricey perfume when she anointed the Lord’s head and feet before the Passover. Can you imagine being at a household monthly budget meeting with Mary and Martha?

¹ St. Porphyrios, *Wounded by Love*, 78–79.

² John 12:3

The Holy Struggle of the Active/Contemplative Life

If you are new to Apostles or Anglicanism, you will learn a saying we often invoke. It's a principle with exceptions, but most of the time we look at things not as 'either-or' but 'both-and.' In this instance, we are *not* commending either the Martha way or the Mary way, but a harmony of the two, **both-and**. We seek the active *and* contemplative life. We desire to be people of prayer *and* practical works. Not either-or, but both-and.

And in the desire to be both-and lies a great struggle. No sense in believing this will be easy.

At the beginning of July, I met with our staff to review the month ahead and reflected a bit about the active and contemplative life, the Mary and Martha way. I'll share with you some of the words I shared with them. None of us will ever achieve perfect harmony of the practical life and prayerful life; the active way and the contemplative way. But this is a holy pursuit. It is a holy *struggle*. I bring no illusions of quick success. We will fail, probably with an excess of activity or busyness. But this is a holy pursuit, regardless of our success or lack thereof.

I don't want to pursue other ways of living and being. Prayer orders this household. Prayer teaches productivity, not the other way around. There is one thing necessary for the disciples of Jesus—that is seeking the presence of Jesus, listening to his voice, in all things. That is the work that orders *all the work that happens in this house*.

Closing: Martha at Jesus' Feet, Mary at Work

As I bring this meditation to a close, I want to offer an image that has inspired my imagination for the past month: Martha at Jesus' feet and Mary at work (repeat).

Throughout this meditation, I've been looking at Mary and Martha as archetypes of the practical life and the prayerful life, but let us remember that this memorable moment was only a single moment. We know from the Gospels that Mary and Martha, with their brother, Lazarus, were dear friends and supporters of our Lord Jesus. As with all disciples, we are called to repentance and full maturity in the Lord.

Invert the postures of the sisters of Bethany and you have a vision of harmony and wholeness. Imagine Martha, repenting of her distracted, anxious, and troubled spirit, setting aside the tasks that undoubtedly swirl in her mind, but choosing to kneel at the feet of Jesus instead. This is how Martha becomes a more contented, peaceful, and focused servant.

But also imagine Mary rising from her posture at the Lord's feet to do some work. And all those with a servant heart said, "Amen, it's about time!"

Imagine Mary doing her part for all that needs doing in the household, whether that be hospitality, meals, household chores. Imagine the peace and patience she brings to her work *having chosen the good portion of seeking the presence of Jesus first*. We don't consider how good of a worker Mary of Bethany was. Scripture is silent on the matter, as it's silent about the habits of Martha at prayer.

Perhaps we are the ones who live the answer. That those drawn to the contemplative life learn how to bring the peace and calm of Jesus into their daily tasks and projects. That those who are more active learn how to lay all their burdens, their anxieties, and troubles about their tasks and projects at the feet of Jesus. To rest in his presence.

It is a holy way, one we will not perfect in this life. A holy struggle. But that struggle here below prepares us for life eternal, where we will sit at the feet of Jesus, enjoy his presence, *and* do work in the eternal Kingdom of God when heaven comes to earth. Let us choose the one thing necessary that all other things that need doing may be done peacefully, calmly, and all for the glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.