

"SISTER ACT"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 13, 1998

After all, assuming that Jesus and the Twelve were all there PLUS Mary and Martha and Lazarus...there were by my count at least 16 hungry people to be fed. It's no wonder that Martha was "distracted with much serving". If you've ever had 16 hungry folk to be fed, you know how she must have felt. Max Lucado is right on target when he writes,

"Every church needs a Martha. Change that. Every church needs a hundred Marthas. Sleeves rolled up and ready... they keep the pace for the church. Because of Marthas, the church budgets get balanced and church buildings get renovated and repaired and cleaned. Babies get bounced on loving knees in the nursery. You don't appreciate a Martha until a Martha is missing! And then all the Marys of the church start scrambling to find the key to lock or unlock a door, or turn off the lights or turn on the fans. YES, indeed, the Marthas are the ENERGIZER BUNNIES of the Church. They keep going and going and going...."

Martha was a real "live wire" to be sure and I'd like to challenge those of you who are Marys to take another look at the Marthas and remember how important they are, but even live wires need a time for "re-charging". For work without worship will soon burn you out. Even in church we can lose our sense of perspective.

There was a cartoon in the New Yorker a while back in which a man and his wife were in a famous art gallery where they saw Leonardo Da Vinci's Last Supper. The man said to his wife,

"That reminds me...I have an Administrative Board Meeting tomorrow evening....."

It may take a moment for you to get it...to catch on. Remember this that the Lord's Supper was not a church meeting, but rather a fellowship supper with great spiritual overtones and our church meetings are important, but only if they are "connected up" to God. All work and no pray soon produces a frazzled Christian. Does that not describe many people today - both in church and out? The Last Supper reminded that man that there was work to be done.

A Gallup Poll reveals that 95% of all Americans hate their jobs. They derive very little meaning and purpose from them. The highest incidence of heart attacks, I once read, takes place on Monday mornings between 8 and 9 am.

People are stressed out. Maybe this was Martha's problem. Maybe this is why she scolds her sister, Mary, but asks Jesus to join in the scolding as well. She has lost her perspective on why she is doing what she is doing. She is preparing a meal for her friend, her teacher, but she is so busy that she cannot enjoy His friendship or His teaching. But Mary, on the other hand, knows that she has a need that food cannot satisfy.

It was about this time last year that the world lost a great saint in Mother Teresa. Did you know that the key to Mother Teresa's commitment and tenacity was found in the fact that she prayed at least one hour a day...usually in the morning...before she attempted to do anything for God? If Mother Teresa had not been so connected up to God, she would have burned out long ago. She was a

"live wire" for God because she was connected up to the ultimate source of power. Her priority was God. All of her programs flowed from that deep reservoir of devotion.

The greatest mistake anyone in ministry can make is to get so busy doing "good works" that they forget the Source of their calling. The greatest mistake anyone can make regardless of their vocation is to get so busy earning a living that they neglect spending time in the presence of the One who is the "Life". And it's no wonder we find our work at times to be so unfulfilling and tedious. We have no great purpose coursing through our blood vessels. We have no vital relationship with the Divine.

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In fact, some of us have made our work our God. And that may be why we resent our work. We don't like power and authority. To worship someone or some thing is to acknowledge power, authority and dominion over you. They become the priority - the NUMBER ONE. Any job that requires your soul is not a labor of love, but a new form of slavery and will ultimately take control of you.

St. Paul said in Philippians, chapter three, verse thirteen, "THIS ONE THING I DO." Now Paul accomplished more in life than most of us will ever accomplish, but it flowed from his own primary commitment - which was to God. You really can't accomplish much when your life is divided, fragmented and going in ten different directions. You become agitated and out of breath. Your goals are a mile wide, but only an inch deep. I've always felt that the worship of God and devotion to Christ helps us see what is vital and of right value. Those Brothers of the ancient Benedictine Order use to say,

"To work is to pray....and to pray is to work....."
It's a delicate balance that must be maintained, but those Brothers in that Order were on the right track.

Notice in verse 42 that Jesus says to Martha,

"Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her..."

Only one thing is necessary. Martha was worried about the "menu" for the meal, when Jesus wanted to teacher her about a meaningful menu for all of life. David Gooding in his book, According to Luke, makes this observation,

"In those circumstances there is no doubt what Christ would have preferred. He would have preferred Martha's fellowship to her service, but Martha's idea of what had to be done was different from her Lord's. As we can now see, it was false. She meant well. She loved the Lord, and she thought she was serving Him, but her sense of proportion with regard to what was necessary was, in fact, depriving the Lord of what He most wished for her and depriving her of what was most necessary. And it had come precisely because she had not first sat at His feet and listened to Him long enough to find out what He regarded as the paramount necessity."

Remember that line of Martin Luther's in the hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God: "The body they may kill, His truth abideth still". Notice that he did not say, "A mighty fortress is our work, or our Church - BUT our God!" Tongues will be silenced and pens and printing presses will stop and meetings will cease, but our fellowship and communion with God who has drawn close to us in Jesus will last...and last...and LAST. From this flows the richness of faith and the strength of character - and the who, the what, the when, the where, and the why and how of life on earth. This I believe.

CLOSING STORY

Let me close with this story. In the city of Brotherly Love there lived a certain son and his mother. The father had died quite early in life so mother and son had become very close...they had to in order to survive. However, the mother knew that the day would come when the boy would become a man and most likely marry and have a family of his own. The day came and she was terribly excited for him. Since money was tight and housing hard to come by, she offered the other half of the duplex they lived in to her son and his bride.

She knew, of course, like all good mother's know, that her son's loyalty would transfer to his bride and children, but all she asked was (and hoped for) was that once a week he would come by and talk and share his work, his hopes and hurts with her. The son said,

"Mom...you know how much I love you. Don't
, sweat it, please....Of course, I'll be there".

And he kept his promise for about a year, but soon he got a promotion in his work. Then one day, a child then another and still another. Soon he found himself waving to his mother as he came and went to and from his work. Then only a phone call now and then. Then only holidays and special days. Soon, he joined a country club and golf became his passion after work.

On his mother's 65th birthday, he went to a fashionable dress shop and purchased his mother an expensive dress. He dropped it off and said, "Happy birthday, mother". She opened the package and looked at the dress. The following conversation followed...

"Oh, son...thank you. I appreciate so much what you have done". He said, "Mother...you don't like it, do you.... I can tell". She said, "Oh, yes...I do...it's just my color...thank you". He said, "Mother, I have the sales slip...they said I can take it back if...." She said, "No, it's a lovely dress". He said, "Mother...you don't fool me.....I can tell....we've been together too long. What's wrong?"

The woman turned and opened her closet door and said,

"Son....I have enough dresses there to last me a lifetime.
I guess all I want to say is that I don't want your dress.
I want you!"

WHAT GOD WANTS

I know it is almost too good to believe, but what the Lord God of the universe actually wants is to spend some time with you and with me.

We need Marys who can learn from Marthas and we need Marthas who can learn from the Marys of the world. We need this delicate balance between our work and our prayer or spiritual life, between service and the spiritual, between busyness and attentiveness. I ask you to pause on this Sunday and to think on these things as we prepare to enter a new year of spiritual growth and service in this church. I invite you to take with you on your journey some words of Charles Wesley, John's younger brother. He put it well when he put to melody:

"Faithful to my Lord's commands,
I still would choose the better part;
Service with careful Martha's hands,
And loving Mary's heart."

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these quiet moments that come at the end of this time of worship. Prepare us for a week of work. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our hearts where things sometimes get out of whack...out of perspective. Help us to strive for the delicate balance between work and worship, between the spiritual and the service needs, between busyness and attentiveness. Help us to remember these two sisters, Mary and Martha, and the lessons they have for each of us. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

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INTRODUCTION

Those of you who are tennis fans may be disappointed to know that this is not a sermon about those delightful and talented "tennis sisters - Serena and Venus Williams. However,

The headline on the cover of a Sports Illustrated some time back read, "Sportswoman of the Year" and one of the pictures on the cover showed Mary Decker pressing the tape as she defeated by inches the Soviet champion, Zamira Zaitseva, in a 1500 meter world championship race. The article went on to describe Mary Decker's fantastic performances in San Diego, Los Angeles, Paris, Oslo and Stockholm.

One comment made about Mary Decker in that article caught my attention and is relevant to today's sermon. The writer of the article said,

"She can sit all evening at the feet of a friend and not say anything....just smile and let the talk wash all over her...."

DEVELOPMENT

Now that's interesting in light of our scripture passage for today. "She can sit all evening at the feet of a friend and not say anything....." I know of another Mary who could do that. Remember the incident? It's there in Luke's Gospel, chapter ten.

This other Mary and her sister, Martha, were close friends of Jesus. They shared something in common with their brother, Lazarus. All three were single persons. We often think of churches as places where only families and married folk gather. However, from the beginning of the early Christian Church, single persons have been an important part of the fellowship. And here in this passage we see three single persons who were important to Jesus.

In the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, Jesus could "hang out". In their home, Jesus could kick off his dusty sandals put his tired feet up and sit back and relax. Here He could "cocoon"...to use a modern term...and bond with people He loved and who loved Him.

Notice now in the 38th verse that Martha, the fastidious housekeeper, opened her home to Jesus and His twelve disciples at a moment's notice. Martha sometimes come out a "heavy" in this story. And that's unfortunate. She was excited to see Jesus. He was a visitor in their home on more than one occasion. And, it was always a pleasure. Jesus was the kind of person anyone would enjoy having for dinner. He was always so loving and so accepting and there's good evidence that He always brought a sense of humor along with Him. Now this was a happy occasion and so it's something of a "downer" when Martha made her cryptic remark to Jesus,

"Sir...doesn't it seem unfair to You that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Please tell her to come out here and help me....right away!"

Now it's obvious that Jesus loved and valued both sisters equally and it's unfortunate that we see only this one occasion when Mary is praised and Martha is put down. I'm sure that Jesus did not mean for us to read it that way.

After all, assuming that Jesus and the Twelve were all there PLUS Mary and Martha and Lazarus...there were by my count at least 17 hungry people to be fed. It's no wonder that Martha was "distracted with much serving". If you've ever had 17 hungry folk to be fed, you know how she must have felt. Max Lucado is right on target when he writes,

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