

"THAT DELICATE BALANCE"

INTRODUCTION

If any of the women present need Biblical justification for getting out of the hot kitchen and into the living room where the vital issues of the day are being discussed, you can take your text from this little story which was read for our Scripture lesson. It's a classic of the story tellers' art, for while it is only five sentences long, it presents a situation that speaks volumes.

Jesus had come to the home of Mary and Martha as a guest. He was a dear friend to them and they naturally wanted to do everything they could to make Him feel comfortable. Martha does it the traditional way...she busies herself in the kitchen getting a huge meal ready. But she's making such a production of it that instead of making her guests feel at home and relaxed, they feel just the opposite, and so does she.

DEVELOPMENT

I think we have all been in situations like this, where the host or hostess is so overzealous about the cleanliness of the house, or so worried about dinner that all spontaneity is lost. Martha is probably the kind of person who would run all around emptying ash trays and wiping them out after every use. She's the kind of person who eventually feels underappreciated, who is inclined to say, "I work and I slave over a hot stove and what appreciation do I get?" You know the type.

Mary takes a different stance. She apparently understood that what Jesus really needed was not a huge meal so much as some understanding and receptivity. So she listens to His teaching. And Jesus is apparently more impressed with this kind of welcome than with all the food on the table. And that's the story.

REFLECTIONS ON IT

Now as Church folk have looked at this story across the centuries, they have praised Mary and put down Martha. But rather than do that this morning, I want to turn this little five sentence story from Luke's Gospel in to a model of self-examination for all of us. For I would like to suggest that when it comes to living a Christian life, the issue for us becomes not either doing - which is, of course, necessary - or listening - which is essential, too - but finding how we can do both. We don't get to choose between Mary and Martha; we are compelled to become both of them.

The insight for this comes from a book by Bruno Bettelheim called "The Uses of Enchantment". In it he has a chapter describing the fable of Sinbad the Seaman and Sinbad the Porter. He points out that the two stories are about different aspects of the same person: that which pushes him to escape into a faraway world of fantasy and adventure and the other part which keeps him bound to common practicality. He goes on to say that the great merit of this tale is that,

"both the seaman and the porter are appealing figures, and neither of the two is denied its attractiveness, importance and validity".

Now, if you will permit me to do the same thing with the Mary / Martha story, I would like to suggest that they, too, are of equal importance and validity when it comes to the way you and I live as Christians. They are illustrative of one of the problems that you and I face in our attempt to lead a Christian life - how do we reach some kind of delicate balance between piety and action, between devotion and doing, between holiness and hustle?

TIMES WHEN WE NEED TO STOP BUSYING ABOUT

The first point I would like to make is that there are times when we need to stop busying about and become quiet enough to hear what God may be trying to say to us. We're a generation and a culture that is full of busyness. We've been called an "incessantly loquacious generation". By and large, we're uncomfortable with the silences of life. We're uneasy with solitude and listening. We get fidgety if the period of silence in our worship goes too long. We get embarrassed if there's a noticeable lull in conversation.

There is both truth and humor in the old story about the non-Quaker young man who was a guest for a meal in a strict Quaker household. He was unfamiliar with their custom of having a silent grace at the beginning of a meal, and later described that part of his visit by saying,

"There was this embarrassing silence when we first sat down at the table and nobody knew what to say and everybody looked down, so...I told a funny story and that seemed to break the ice".

All of us are prone to fill the silences of life with telephone, television, radio, conversation. I think we need more people who are taking time to reflect carefully about the meaning of the events on our time and the meaning of God's will for us. We need time to search for that kind of answer and let's face it: most of us are not yet geared to making that kind of time in our daily schedule. Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes:

(sacred) "If one sets aside time for a business appointment, a trip to the hairdresser, a social engagement, or a shopping expedition, that time is accepted as inviolable. But if one says, 'I cannot come because that is my hour to be alone' one is considered rude, or strange, or egotistical. What a commentary on our civilization when being alone is considered suspect; when one has to apologize for it, make excuses, hide the fact that one practices it, like a secret vice".

Sometimes even in prayer, we want to do all the talking. We can find all sorts of excuses: there are pressures on our lives, we're involved with a great many things. We're busy serving in a variety of ways - in the community, in the Church. Sometimes our serving has a way of becoming busyness. I found a poem about a too-busy lady which says it all about those of us who can't slow down and take the time to listen.

"On Monday she lunched with the Housing Committee,
With statistics and stew she was filled;
Then she dashed to a tea on 'Crime in the City'
And dined with the Church Women's Guild.
On Tuesday she went to a Babies' Week lunch,
And a tea on 'Good Citizenship'.
At dinner she talked to the Trade Union bunch
There wasn't a date she dared skip.
On Wednesday she managed two annual dinners,
One at noon and the other at night.
On Thursday a luncheon on 'Bootleg Sinners'
And a dinner on 'War: Is It Right?'
'World Problems We Face' was her Friday noon date,
A luncheon address as you guessed.

And she wielded a form while a man from New York
Spoke that evening on Social Unrest.
On Saturday noon she fell into a swoon
Missed a talk on the 'Youth of Our Land'.
Poor thing! She was through. She never came to,
But she died with a spoon in her hand."

Aren't there times when you feel just like that lady? Sure, we'd like to live the life of prayer...but there's always one more meeting to attend...one more thing that has to be done...it's just impossible. What a blow to our egos to learn that the late Dag Hammarskjold in addition to being one of the busiest men on the earth in the role of Secretary General of the UN, found the time to become a modern mystic. His book of meditation and prayer reveals that this man, whose life was an almost constant and exhausting public event found time to live in constant interior dialogue with God. And we say we're too busy? We say, we don't have time? We have all the time there is. It's a matter of priority.

A CHALLENGE Let me lay down a challenge for some of you who have never been listeners before to deliberately develop this side of your life. You may not have been a Mary before, but you could be, and it is important. It's important enough that Jesus, throughout His ministry, constantly took time to be alone, to renew His energies, to develop the power that was in Him. Those of us who profess to be His followers can do no less!

MOVING ON Let me move on to the second point I wish to develop. As I see it, most people are more comfortable with playing Martha than we are trying to be a Mary. Let's face it: a lot of programming has gone into producing that feeling in us. We've grown up with a suspicion of that kind of holiness that is concerned merely with our personal good feelings and is oblivious to the evil at work in the world. One thinks of the captain of the slave ship in "Roots", reading his Bible and praying while human beings rotted and died in the hell hole below. Ed Asner

I use to be troubled as a teenager growing up, by one of the merchants in my hometown upstate who was always at Sunday School, always giving solid testimony of his faith in Christ, of his salvation, but who was known as a hard man in business...who squeezed his customers unmercifully and was totally uncharitable in his business dealing. He made good money and kept most of it, too. There are those abuses of personal holiness, and many of us are determined not to repeat them if we can help it. We want a faith that is not removed from, but related to the lives we lead day by day. And that, friend, means action. And faith without action is dead.

FAITH WITHOUT ACTION Let me repeat that. Faith without action is dead. Jesus had a lot to say about this. He constantly attacked those whose faith did not lead on to good works. There have got to be times when what we believe is undergirded by action and time and activity or it loses its sense of importance.

I'm very fond of the story of the New England skipper who shipped out for a trip to the Orient. Many people from his town gave him lists of things they hoped he would buy for them. Most of them gave him money to do it. When he returned he began to parcel out the goods he had brought back and reported that he had placed all the other slips in order on the rail of the ship. On each he had placed

the coins which had been sent to make the purchase. Those that had no coins on them, he reported, had an alarming tendency to blow away and become lost and so he could not fill the order. Perhaps next time.

I confess there are times when I feel just like that, when I would like to say I believe in something, but have not yet put down any coins of commitment to actions that would give credence to the fact that I really mean it. Let's take it a step further...all of us.

We say in this Church that we believe in caring for others, that we are a caring fellowship, but for whom have you cared in a real way this past week? When was the last time you did something that would - in no matter how small a way - demonstrate your commitment to care. Or, we Christians say that we are working in our society to make it look more like the Kingdom of God, but what have you done to make that vision come a bit closer...this past week. We say we believe God has given us a world to care for and be responsible for, but we rape and abuse it. We say we believe our bodies are "temples" of God, but we abuse and misuse them until nobody could believe we truly think that.

EASIER TO SAY THAN TO ACT

It's easier to say we are committed than to act committed. It's easier to say that we believe in Jesus Christ than to act in disciplined ways that reflect His spirit. The thing that has consistently commended the Christian faith to people across the centuries has been that because they believed, they had gone out to do something. We do not become holy because we are serving. We serve because something of God's holiness has touched our lives in a significant way and we are responding to it. And so let me also challenge some of you who profess belief, but who have never really let it flow out in to a project of Christian action to consider doing so, to develop that side of your nature.

BALANCE

Perhaps you see where all of this is leading. It is to the admonition that we must in some way combine the Mary and the Martha in us, develop what is weak, become hearers and doers both. This is the essential truth in a bit of rhyme that I'm fond of which puts it this way:

"In Eastern lands the holiest gents
Are those that live at least expense;
They rarely speak. They seek release
From active life in prayer and peace.

But in the Western Hemisphere
A saint must catch the public ear,
And dust about and shout and hustle
Combining holiness and hustle."

~~The point is, I think, to live as followers of the Man from Nazareth we must be both listeners and doers, we must combine both faith and action - holiness and hustle, if you will. Neither stance is appropriate in all situations. Those who settle down to devotion and listening can end up being passive bystanders. Those who dash off to do something without reflection can spread themselves so thin that there is no power in their doing. The task is to find that delicate balance, to know when listening is necessary in order to catch the vision and other times when action is required so that the vision can be implemented. Each needs the other. We need both the Marys and the Marthas. They are of equal importance and validity in leading and living the Christian life.~~

PRAYER God, our Father, whether we tend to identify with Mary or with Martha, help us above all else to be faithful followers of Jesus, our Lord.

Help us to be open to Your spirit, to seek Your will through prayer and the reading of the Bible, through the quiet time. And then, Lord, help us to do something with the light that is given to us, incarnating the vision..working for change, supporting the forward movements of life when and where we can.

For this is the challenge that comes to us, this hour, this day, to each of us. In the spirit of Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen

CLOSING Our task is to find that delicate balance, to know when listening is necessary to catch the vision...and other times when action is required so that the vision can be implemented.

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