

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

"Duty and Devotion"

Why are we here today?

- Is it a sense of having to, a deep responsibility to the Lord for all that He has done for you?
- Is it possible to serve the Lord out of habit rather than out of love?

In Luke chapter ten Jesus has been discussing with a Jewish religious leader about the two great commandments of Holy Scripture; the summary of the Law that we spoke this morning. We are to love God with all our heart, mind and soul and that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. As we read last Sunday - Jesus has just used the parable of "*The Good Samaritan*" to show how we should love our neighbor and now He uses the story of two sisters, Martha and Mary, to illustrate how we should love God.

Today's Gospel reading takes place in the village of Bethany, located just outside of Jerusalem on the other side of the Mount of Olives. Martha lived with her sister Mary and their later to be famous brother - Lazarus. Here in the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, Jesus and his disciples sit down, getting away from the crowds. Jesus is among friends, He has the opportunity to unwind; to relax and to share in a unique fellowship. It is a place that He had been many times. Both sisters are delighted to see Jesus but they express their enthusiasm in very different ways.

All people are wired differently; some are active – always on the go like the energizer bunny, never able to sit still, while others are more pensive, willing to sit back and think things through. Martha is a very activity-oriented person. Her sister appeared to be of the more pensive nature. Quite often we have contrasted Martha and Mary, as though each Christian should make a choice to either be a worker bee like Martha or a worshipper like Mary. But in doing so I think we miss the point, the Lord wants each of us to imitate Mary in our worship and Martha in our work, and to achieve balance in both.

Mary is content to just sit at Jesus' feet soaking up the Word, and not "do" anything, but her big sister, Martha was looking around at all the guests and saw the need to prepare a meal. Martha was obviously a great hostess; she got up and began to prepare food for Jesus and all those there with Him. Martha looked and said to herself "What privilege to prepare a meal for the Master!" Mary on the other hand would have said, "What a privilege to sit at the feet of the Master." So let me ask you: Is one right and the other wrong? No. Duty and Devotion are both necessary but there has got to be a balance.

We can all relate to surprise visitors and can see why Martha is flustered and feeling more and more frustrated with each passing moment. Verse 40 tells us, "*But Martha was distracted with all of her preparations*" the sense of the Greek word περισπάω (*perispao*) which is translated as "distracted"; meaning "to be pulled away" or "dragged away." Simply put, Martha wanted to

hear Jesus herself, she wanted to be seated at his feet too, but she was pulled away by her sense of her “duties.” Worrying about the meal robbed her of the joy of her service to the Lord. We are to be serious about what we are called to do, but not to the point that we overestimate ‘our importance.’ The problem was not in the work that Martha was doing. **It was the attitude that became the problem.** Martha’s problem was one of balance, between the going and doing and the sitting and listening. The difference between Martha and Mary is not that one served and the other did not, but one served out of duty and the other out of devotion. In today’s day and age - if we’re busy, we’re important; if we’re not busy, we’re too embarrassed to admit it.

I believe that Martha wanted to honor Jesus and I believe that she began her work with the right attitude. Ladies, all of you can identify with this: you begin the huge task of huge Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner, or a parish meal with the greatest of enthusiasm, but as time passes you come to realize that you are running out of time (and energy) and you cannot possibly finish everything that you planned to do. You get upset – upset with yourself for letting yourself get in this fix and upset with anyone else who might have made a difference in accomplishing your goals. Martha was like that, the harder she worked the more upset she became! It seems to me that Martha was ‘burnt out’ in her service. It is bad enough to have everything to do, it is even worse when we can think of someone who could have offered to help –but didn’t. That is what I see is happening to Martha. Tension and frustration mount when we are performing the wrong tasks or trying to cram too many of the right activities into a given period. Then we develop a critical spirit and we begin to judge and condemn others for what they do or don’t do. We can all be guilty of this. It is not what the Lord wants from us.

In the second part of verse forty, Martha finally explodes and she comes boiling out of the kitchen, red-faced and furious and says; *"Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me."* She doesn’t even call her sister by name. She probably tried everything she could think of to attract Mary’s attention and signal her that she needed help. We all have ways that we use to get a message across. We clear our throats. We make attention-getting motions. In my wife’s case she gives me ‘the look.’ Y’all know what ‘the look’ is, right? Men you have received and been the object of ‘the look’ right?

Have you ever been in a situation – at a dinner table and you try to get someone’s attention – to get them to go along with you – and they respond “why are you kicking me under the table?” We have a situation like that in this text when Martha cannot get Mary’s attention. She gets even more irritated when the other person ignored her. Mary was willing to face Martha’s anger, because sitting at the feet of Jesus meant everything to her at this point. No one can force us to be devoted, it is a voluntary decision.

Martha was so angry at Mary for being so selfish and she is angry at Jesus for allowing this to go on. Notice that Martha addressed her irritation to Jesus. You have to admit that she has got a lot of brass! Martha is accusing Jesus of not caring for her, because she was sure that if Jesus really cared for her He would tell Mary to get up and help her. Whenever our service causes us

to criticize others and pity ourselves because we feel overworked, we had better take time to examine our lives!

It is interesting how Martha links Jesus' care for her with His willingness to tell Mary to get busy helping her. Martha thought that she knew how Jesus should demonstrate his care for her. It makes you wonder: Do we ever accuse God of not caring for us, because we have already decided what His care for us looks like? Part of the Martha's problem was that she worried too much about what others were doing. In today's Gospel - Jesus by His refusal to do as Martha asked demonstrates that even though what she was doing was valuable work, she shouldn't worry about Mary's choices. It all boiled down to the fact that Martha wanted to force Mary to serve Christ in her way.

In verse 41 and 42 Jesus responds to Martha, "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*" I can just see Martha now – scratching her head – ‘what does that mean?’ Jesus shows Martha great tenderness. Jesus did not rebuke her for making preparations for Him and the other guests; He is not rejecting Martha's attempt to serve Him. Martha's problem was not that she was preparing food for her guests to eat, this was necessary, but she gave too much importance to it. Today we still have to be careful that we do not let the necessary things that must be done get out of balance and distort our lives. The core of Martha's problem is that she was trying to impose her value system on Mary.

Jesus did not tell Martha to do what Mary was doing. It was Martha's attitude that needed correction, but Martha's work was both good and necessary. The reality is that as believers today we need to cultivate both the Martha and the Mary in each of us.

Martha came to Jesus because she wanted Him to lighten her load that day. He did what she wanted but not in the way that she had expected. He lightened her load not by having Mary help her but by giving her a new perspective on her work. When we forget why it is that we are doing what we are doing we can get turned upside down, and we may end up feeling overworked and worse yet, feeling unappreciated. When we seek His will and keep our attitude right - we find that God will enable us to do what He “needs” to be done with joy and satisfaction.

Unless we take time to spend time with Jesus personally and privately, we will soon end up like Martha busy but not blessed. Martha was not wrong and neither was Mary. It is a case of where one did good and the other did better. The Christian life is learning to balance duty and devotion.

- Sitting without serving is powerless
- Serving without sitting is directionless.
- Serving after sitting produces power and balance.

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, July 17, 2016, Year C

One of the two greatest confessions concerning the person of Jesus Christ was given by Martha and recorded in John 11:27 with the dying of Lazarus, while the other was given by Peter recorded in Matthew 16:16 – at Caesarea Philippi. With her brother Lazarus already dead and buried, Jesus arrived and was seeking to comfort her and He told her, "*I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?*" Her response is one of the greatest confessions of all time, for Martha replies, "*Yes, Lord,*" she told him, "*I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.*" She evidently overcame her propensity to be distracted long enough and sat at the feet of Jesus enough to grow into a woman of profound faith.

What about Mary? We meet Mary two more times, and each time she is at the feet of Jesus. In John chapter twelve Jesus came to Bethany to meet with Lazarus, Martha and Mary. There they made Him supper; and Martha served. What else is new! "*Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.*" She was severely criticized by at least one apostle and maybe others for her action. Did she quit because of the criticism? No. We believe that she was one of the women at the tomb on the morning of the resurrection. **When you sit at the feet of Jesus you learn not to quit because of hard feelings. You learn to turn the other cheek and go on.**

These two passages, concerning Martha's confession and Mary's worship, give evidence that both these sisters achieved the balance between duty and devotion. I pray that the Lord would bless each one of us with the desire to serve and the devotion to worship – in a blessed balance that would serve to honor God – and draw us closer to His presence.