

**1st Reading:** Genesis 18:1-10 [Abraham said, "Do not go on past your servant"]

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 15 ["Let all the earth cry out to God with joy"]

**2nd Reading:** Galatians 6:14-18 [Peace and mercy be to all who follow the way of Christ]

**Gospel:** Luke 10:38-42 [The kingdom of God is at hand for you]

*A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Luke*

*And it came to pass while they were journeying, Jesus entered into the village of Bethany and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.*

*She had a sister whose name was Mary, who came and sat at the feet of our Lord and listened to his words.*

*But Martha was busy with many household cares, and she came and said to Jesus, My Lord, you do not seem to care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me!*

*Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and anxious about many things; there is need of only one thing.*

*Mary has chosen the good portion for herself,  
And it shall not be taken away from her"*

(Luke 10: 38-42, Lamsa translation)



♪ O Lord, you are the center of my life:  
I will always praise you, I will always serve you,  
I will always keep you in my sight. ♪

I hear this song as the theme of the Scriptures we heard today. Abraham and Sarah welcome the messengers of God and fed them; the one who *does* justice lives in God's presence in the responsorial psalm; St. Paul proclaims that Christ is in us, at the center of our being; Martha serves Jesus and Mary sits at his feet. Praise/service/vision.

But there is a tension in the Gospel today, between Martha and Mary – and between Jesus and his culture. I believe if we look at that tension it can give us insight into how to deal with the tensions in our lives.

The story of Martha and Mary, so familiar to us, had to be shocking to the people who heard it: They would have expected Jesus to say: "Mary, help your sister, hospitality is a sacred duty, remember Abraham when he welcomed the three strangers at his tent." He and Sarah served them, and then Abraham sat at their feet."

Jesus turned his culture upside down when he told Martha, "Let your sister be here at my feet. There is need of only one thing" What was he saying: To them and to us? He was saying, "I am God's messenger, just as much as the strangers who came to Abraham. Put me at the center of your work and your prayer."

But he was also saying:

"All are welcome to sit at my feet as disciples." Another shock, since only men were allowed to sit at the feet of a Rabbi as disciples. If he were with Abraham, he would have invited Sarah to come to sit with her husband after both had served the messengers of God.

We live in many tensions today, and the Gospel promise confounds *our* culture as well as the culture of Jesus' time. We still have not caught up with Jesus in the way we treat women both in society and the Church.

Many talk about this Gospel as an invitation to achieve a balance between work and prayer. I like to see it as an invitation to live creatively in the tension rather than to find a permanent balance.

Let me give you an image of what I mean:

A violin string - before it is on the instrument - will make no sound.

But once it is on the violin, it can make beautiful music:

What is the difference? Two things: *Tension & Connection*. These strings are *connected* to the violin. And they make no sound without being in tension, [66 pounds of it, to be exact]

But it's not just any tension, they need to be tuned to just the right degree of tension to play the right note, and they are always tuned in relationship to each other.

In the Gospel story, Jesus was not putting Martha down, he was lifting both Mary and Martha up, and reminding them that they are sisters, including both of them in his embrace. He was calling them back to connection with each other and with him. He was restoring the right tension between the details of hospitality and the purpose of welcoming a guest.

He was tuning the string of the tension between women and men by making it clear that all of us are called both to sit at his feet and to do the work of service.

Twenty years ago, I shared a dream with Sr. Anna and a few others that we could find a balance between prayer and ministry, work and rest, hospitality and solitude, the active and the contemplative dimensions of our lives. We called it Bethany Ministries. It has become a community of financially independent households who work at living in the spirit of Martha, Mary and Lazarus of Bethany.

We wanted to find a way for the Martha and Mary inside us to be friends, to live in balance. I had worked at that for years, but every time I felt that balance, one of the sides of the tension moved. I could never get it so it would be permanent. I could never eliminate the tension. I think I was looking for a *utopia* - something which many have sought in the history of the world. But the word literally means "no place," so any pretention of finding utopia would be arrogant and dishonest.

So I looked at the way Francis went **back and forth** between praying in caves and serving the lepers, and thought of my violin and I gave up trying to create that place of perfect balance. I began to accept the tension as a permanent reality, and to look at life as a search to live creatively in the tensions that are always there. I saw them as good and necessary for a full and happy life, and a gift from God. After all, the only place in this world where there is no tension is a cemetery.

But I found that to keep from going too far to one side or the other I had to go back and forth, like Francis and Jesus. That included the need to **change**, to move from Martha to Mary and back. It would be easier, sometimes, to just stay on one side - either as Mary the contemplative or Martha the worker bee.

In our culture, I think the Martha side is more rewarded. Helping or working gives me more control. I often feel like Lazarus, waiting to be raised from the dead, when I stop my feverish activity to take time to be in silence at the Lord's feet, or when I am called from a time of prayer or retreat to clean the house or to go on the road again. Change is often a kind of death. Like Monk, on the TV series, I can say, "I don't mind change, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Francis of Assisi lived a life that included going between service and prayer. He saw himself, and every disciple of Christ as *both* Martha and Mary. We will not find true peace by eliminating tension, as our culture sometimes tells us.

Nor are we saved by pitting one side against another, as the culture of war and death implies; we are called to embrace all of ourselves, and our connection with each other as one human family, we are called to put Jesus at the center of *both* our prayer and our work, we are called to go through the cross of change which those choices include.

We will not find true peace by eliminating tension, as our culture sometimes tells us. Nor are we saved by destroying the ones we call our enemies or pitting one side against another, as we see in so much of our world.

We are called to embrace all of ourselves, and our connection with each other as one human family, we are called to put Jesus at the center of *both* our prayer and our work. We are called to live the values of Jesus and to always keep his way of service and love as our goal & inspiration for our day to day lives.

The song I played to begin this homily gives us the key to living creatively in all the tensions of our lives:

♪♪ **O Lord, you are the center of my life:  
I will always praise you, I will always serve you,  
I will always keep you in my sight. ♪♪**

