

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest; and let these gifts to us be blessed.

When I was the age to be confirmed, we lived in Switzerland and attended St. Ursula's Anglican Church in Bern, that being the closest English-speaking equivalent to the Lutheran tradition in which I was raised.

There were only two confirmands, and the bishop of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe came into town with his wife, and they stayed with us.

My cousins who lived in Germany also drove up for the occasion.

So we had a houseful of exalted guests – there was a lot to do, cleaning, making beds, planning meals, polishing silver. Only the best for guests, right?

At some point during these preparations my mother told us we should leave the better part of the ham for our guests. This was the last straw for me.

I drew myself up in all the righteous indignation that only a 13-year-old girl can muster, and delivered myself of a speech about why, if we value family so much, do we give the best of everything to guests? "Why wouldn't you want your family whom you love to have the best part of the ham?"

I demanded of my mother. "Why don't we use the good china all the time?"

And though I have grown up to be a hostess who get out the china for company, who buys better cuts of meat for guests, who in general gives Martha a run for her money – I think my 13-year-old self was on to something.

Something more "Mary"-like. The "better part" is not only for the guests.

The "better part" is for the most beloved. In God's eyes, we are the most beloved.

When we set a place for God at our tables, the guest becomes the host.

We are invited to receive. And boy, is that hard for most of us.

Because out there in the world, we are not invited to sit, or to "be."

Out there, we are rewarded for how productive we can be,

for much we accomplish, for how much evidence there is of our contribution.

No one would argue that what Martha was doing wasn't important.

Feeding people is an essential ministry, one that also shows forth the Kingdom.

I'm sure they could smell the roasting lamb and the garlic,

the scent of lemon and rosemary in the air.

She was preparing a great gift, not only for her beloved Jesus, but for all his friends.

But all that was for before. Once he arrived, the better place was out there with him. Let the roast wait. Let others help when the time for eating arrived. Now was the time for being with him, soaking him in.

The lie that Martha was living under; the lie that I spend so much of my life under; the lie that many of us are so oppressed by, is the lie that “I have to do it.” Sometimes we think “I have to do it or it won’t be done right.” Sometimes we think “I have to do it, because no one else cares.” Sometimes we think “I have to do it, so they’ll love me.” But what if Martha could have unbent a little and allowed everyone to help after Jesus had finished talking. What if she could have yielded her agenda, her insistence that only Mary could help, and only right then, and trusted that – if she sat, as she may have longed to do – everything would have gotten done. Her anxiety caused her to miss the fact that God was sitting in her living room. When we set a place for God at your table, God brings gifts for us. Is it polite to refuse to receive the gifts a guest brings?

Martha thought she was serving Jesus the best way possible, meeting his needs. Often, we think that is what our ministries are supposed to be: meeting needs. What if our ministries were really about inviting people to come with us into the presence of Christ?

The world can meet needs. Social workers and food pantries can meet needs. Our special gift – and calling – is to make Jesus known to people who need him, To connect people with the fiercely accepting love of Jesus. I can’t think of a time in the gospels when Jesus asks anyone to serve him. He asks people to follow him, come into relationship with him, in which they are transformed. He invites them to give of themselves in freedom. I love the way he addresses Martha in this story, personally: “Martha, Martha.” Accurately naming her condition: “You are worried and distracted.” Refusing to get sucked into her triangle drama with her sister, but gently redirecting her to what is going to bring her freedom.

There is undeniably a tension between the ministry of Martha – which is essential – and the ministry of Mary, which is undervalued in our culture. There are lots of reasons for that – one is our society and its value on productivity. One is our culture and the speed at which everything is done and said.

One is actually physiological – for many of us, sitting quietly allows us to get in touch with what we’re feeling and that can be so uncomfortable, many of us have become wired to get anxious when we’re still, and calmer when we’re occupied with some activity. It’s called “stress addiction,” and many of us have it.

This was such a revelation to me – I first saw it named in a great book called “Addiction and Grace” by Gerald May.

He talks about how behaviors can set up brain activity; we all know by now that chemicals do it, which is why it’s so hard to kick addictions to alcohol or drugs – your brain becomes wired to crave that reaction. But behaviors do it too.

The things we do repeatedly are usually things that help us find equilibrium.

They may not be good for us, but they’re safe. They’re the comfort zone. May says,

Mediating all the stimuli they receive, the cells of our brains are continually seeking equilibrium, developing patterns of adaption that constitute what is normal. Thus the more we become accustomed to seeking spiritual satisfaction through things other than God the more abnormal and stressful it becomes to look for God directly.¹

And yet, looking for God, coming to know God and allow our spirits to become tuned to hearing the voice of God as it comes in prayer and other ways – that’s in some ways what we are made for. That’s the “better part” that Mary saw. May gives wonderful insight into why it’s so hard for us:

It is in the realm of spiritual practice..., that attachment to stress becomes most obvious. Spending time in quiet, receptive openness is an essential part of prayer, meditation, and most other spiritual practices. In such settings, even mild addiction to stress becomes rapidly and painfully evident. For many modern spiritual pilgrims, the simple matter of taking time for daily prayer can become a battle of will excruciatingly reminiscent of that encountered in chemical addiction. The mind can generate wondrous excuses to do something instead of just being open and present. The struggles that go on between being and doing can be awesome. Issues of control and willpower, surrender and defeat rage with all the drama of true spiritual warfare.

There are many things all of us might rather avoid in prayer: we might rather not relinquish our sense of self-mastery; we might rather not hear what God might ask of us; we might rather avoid the self-knowledge that comes to us in quite. Now, in addition, increasing numbers of us are discovering that we would rather not experience the discomfort of being peaceful.²

¹ Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (1988, Harper Collins); p. 93

² Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (1988, Harper Collins); p. 89

There is another harm that stress addiction and relentless cycles of “doing” bring: they suppress our imaginations.

When we can’t imagine something, we can’t move toward it.

Sarah was convinced – logically – that these visitors who showed up saying she’d bear a son next year were nuts. She was too old, and had never had children. She literally could not conceive of her dreams coming to her.

She threw herself into her hosting duties.

But God had gifts for her – and through her, a promise to all nations.

Martha could not imagine the work getting done without Mary’s help.

She could only see “not enough” – not enough help, not enough time, not enough space. Jesus knew you have to be still to receive his best gifts.

Developing our “Mary” selves is crucial to becoming the whole men and women God desires us to be.

And it is crucial to cultivating the kind of holy imagination

that can envision justice and equal access to resources;

that can imagine a country where white supremacy no longer rules;

that can imagine a world in which people collaborate rather than compete;

that can see the hurting and the hurtful with God’s eyes of love.

We need a holy imagination to live out the promise God has in mind for us, to make a God-shaped impact in Charles County and beyond.

As Amanda Gorman said so movingly in her inauguration poem, *The Hill We Climb*,

...the new dawn blooms as we free it, for there is always light

if only we’re brave enough to see it, if only we’re brave enough to be it.

We need to learn to receive God’s gifts – because only God can transform this hurting world of ours, and God has chosen to work through us.

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest; and let these gifts to us be blessed.

Amen.

Luke 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Genesis 18:1-10a

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on-- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Colossians 1:15-28

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.