

WHICH ONE ARE YOU?

Are you a Martha, or a Mary?

If Jesus dropped by your house for Sunday dinner this afternoon, would you scurry around frantically, even in this heat, keeping an eye on the pot roast so it wouldn't burn, tossing the salad, baking up some of your popular molasses cookies for dessert, and digging out the good china so you could set a decent table for your special guest? That's Martha.

Or would you be more inclined to sit quietly with Jesus and keep him company? Maybe ask him those significant questions about life, love and God that you've had on your mind for a while, then listen carefully and soak up his response like a thirsty sponge? That's Mary.

We're now well into the summer season, and many people are taking vacations. From what I've observed, there are "Martha Vacations" and there are "Mary Vacations."

Some people love to take a Martha-type vacation in which they plan to see seven European countries in ten days. Or they use their two weeks off to participate in every single outdoor sport known to humanity, and they keep on going like the Energizer Bunny from the first day to the last. "Rest? I can rest at home when I get back from my vacation," they say.

Other people want to get away from work and do little or nothing when they're on vacation. And they don't need to travel far or go somewhere fancy or extravagant to do that. For them, a great escape can be reading a good book at home, or lying on a nearby beach listening to the waves and soaking up the sun. They're into serenity and quiet relaxation. That's a Mary-type Staycation.

One type of vacation isn't necessarily better than the other, they're simply different. The Mary-type vacation puts a premium on tranquility and rejuvenation, and the Martha-type vacation emphasizes adventure and activity. Both can be a great way to renew oneself, depending on whether you're a Martha or a Mary.

So, which one are you?

I know what I am. I'm a Martha. For as long as I can remember, I've been a task-oriented, goal-seeking, high-achieving person. I rarely move from one

objective to another without careful planning and preparation.

Life in this world can be pretty unpredictable, and I like to control as much of it as I can (while God laughs!). I do better when my life has structure and order; when I know what's expected of me and where the goal posts are. I begin each day with a list, and I check that list carefully as I move throughout the day, step-by-calculated step.

The trouble is, there's a part of me that's also a Mary. As a kid who had two brothers and two sisters vying for my mother's attention along with me, Mom didn't have a whole lot of time to spend on each of us individually. Consequently, I spent a lot of time by myself. Being alone so much, I found ways to keep myself entertained, and I even came to enjoy my hours of solitude. Maybe that's why now, on those days when my life gets extremely busy, I try to seek out times of quiet and seclusion. I read somewhere that Mahatma Gandhi used to spend two or three days in total privacy and silence for every day he spent leading a religious and political movement in public. That time of hushed aloneness enabled him to reconstitute himself.

I'm sure that one reason I enjoy being a pastor is because in the parish ministry there are times when I'm busy, setting goals, putting together worship and funeral services, preaching sermons and interacting with other people. A pastor needs to be available to people in need. You've got to be willing to go out in the middle of the night when there's a tragedy in your congregation. You've got to plan out your already busy day in such a way that you have time to meet with the people who require pastoral support and guidance. That's Martha.

On the other hand, as a pastor I must also spend time alone, in prayer, studying the Scriptures and silently reflecting on the Word of God. Silence is a good thing for a minister to practice, because sometimes the best thing to do in a pastoral visit is to not say anything, to just be there with someone and simply listen. Pastors call that the "ministry of presence": just sitting quietly beside someone in their time of need, not saying or doing anything except being with them. That's Mary.

This story in Luke's Gospel raises the question, is the Martha way of doing things better than the Mary way? Or vice versa? In other words, in Jesus' eyes, and to his way of thinking, is it preferable to be Martha, the busy as a bee, get things done go-getter? Or might it be more desirable to Jesus to be like Mary, the quiet, reflective, solitary woman who simply sat at Jesus' feet, listening to what he has to say.

I used to believe that Jesus favored Mary in this Gospel story. But my view

has changed. Now I believe this story of Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary's home teaches that Jesus was okay with both types. You see, the Christian life sometimes calls for a "Type A" personality, vigorously active and task-oriented, because nothing would get done in the church without such people. But other times the church needs a "Type B" person, who is able to sit quietly and listen, opening themselves to the Spirit of the risen Christ teaching something new.

I think we do a disservice to this story of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary when we interpret it in such a way that we pit the two sisters against each other in some kind of "one is better than the other" contest. The key that unlocks the meaning of this Gospel passage isn't figuring out which of them got discipleship right and which one got it wrong, but rather, to understand how both Martha and Mary were doing something beneficial for Jesus, and how both were being faithful disciples.

When Jesus told Martha that Mary had "chosen the better part," we tend to focus in on the word "part." But in the original Greek language, that little phrase is perhaps better translated that Mary is playing "a good role." Not better than Martha, but a good and beneficial role in and of itself. In other words, Jesus was telling Martha, Mary wasn't doing anything wrong. In fact, she was doing something very right.

And as for Martha, she was doing something very right, as well. Martha was busy doing good things, preparing to show Jesus warm hospitality. And because hospitality to visitors who came to your home was commanded of the Jews by God, Martha was faithfully keeping the Jewish law. So Martha's part was good. Mary, who was reflecting on the significance of what Jesus was saying, listening to his every word, was also playing a good part. Her role was different from that of Martha, but it was still necessary. Sitting at Jesus' side, listening to him and learning from him, is a vitally important part of what a responsible disciple of Christ is supposed to do.

One of the great acts of grace and love Jesus bestows on us is blessing us with our various parts, each of us doing activities for the Lord that utilize our specific joys, talents and interests while still serving him. I will tell you from firsthand experience as a parish minister that every church badly needs people who are Martha-types, energetic accomplishers and follow-through individuals who are excellent at organizing and doing. And churches also badly need Mary-type people who are outstanding at being still and quiet so they can listen to, learn from, reflect on and pray to Christ, the head of the church, and discern what Jesus wants and expects from his followers.

Some people are either Martha or Mary. They're one or the other. But I think most of us have a bit of Mary and a bit of Martha in us. And that's okay, because Jesus blesses both the Martha-type people and the Mary-type people.

It might come as a surprise to some of us that Jesus blesses Mary, who simply sits there and listens to Jesus. After all, the New Testament has many, many passages that call people to act. To get up out of our pew seats and dynamically follow Christ. To walk with him. To feed the hungry and give the thirsty a cup of water in his name. Jesus himself said many times to his followers to go out, to do, to serve. What's the saying? Christianity is a verb. It's an action, and on the surface, action was the last thing Mary seemed to be doing. But in this story, Jesus blessed Mary; therefore, our Lord blesses the part of us that wants nothing more than to be with him, wants to enjoy his presence, wants to drink in his every word. Like we're doing right now, during this worship service.

My friends, let us remember that Jesus loved both sisters—Martha, the busy as a bee, get things done, can't stop now I've got too much to do go-getter; and Mary, the quiet, reflective, solitary woman who was simply listening to what he had to say. They could both offer something to his ministry and be uniquely faithful disciples of Jesus.

And Jesus will surely bless us, whether we're a Martha or a Mary, or a little of both, because we, in our own individual ways, can also offer something uniquely faithful to his ministry. Thanks be to God. Amen.