

July 18, 2010
Pentecost VIII, Proper 11, Year C
Amos 8:1-12
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Relax! Just relax!” When someone talks to you that way in a troubled moment, when things seem truly messed up, how often does it work for you to be told to relax? You’re busy or stressed out or upset, and not feeling at all calm, and someone – even a loved one – tells you to relax. All of sudden do you feel relaxed?

It doesn’t typically work for me. Telling me to chill out or lighten up or calm down, I usually find annoying. Calming down, relaxing, lightening up is not easy. It doesn’t happen at the flick of a switch. I expect that most of us, when we’re all worked up, would like to be able to relax and smell the flowers, but getting there requires a deep inner change. Few of us can calm down in a snap.

In today’s gospel, Martha’s frantic. She’s fussing about, trying to take care of everything. When we’re keyed up and moving, moving, moving, it’s hard to be centered and grounded, and it’s hard to connect to other people, or to God, or to ourselves. Mary’s also exhausted, trying to take care of everything, to be the perfect hostess, to do all the work. She’s tired and resentful about it.

But in a way, Martha also likes to be running around. It helps her feel in charge, in control. It makes her feel important. She’s accomplishing something. She’s purposeful, needed, competent. She may also feel a bit superior, righteous, virtuous. She may also like it because staying busy would help her to avoid her inner life. A good way to ignore our inner life is always being on the move, always doing something.

Martha’s conflicted, but she only expresses one side – her resentment. She’s says, “It’s not fair. Mary’s not contributing. Mary’s taking advantage of me. This isn’t right.” She’s worked up, agitated, angry. Jesus doesn’t tell her to relax. He observes the facts as he sees them: “You are anxious and distracted with many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen it. It can’t be taken away from her.”

Jesus implies that Martha needs to see things differently. He implies that she needs to wake up and to focus on what matters most. If she did focus on what matters most, her values, her behaviors, her attitudes would change. That kind of deep inner change is enormously difficult, and it doesn’t happen quickly. But if Martha gave it a go, over time she’d become calmer, more

relaxed, less fretful, less anxious, less easily irritated.

Martha's gets her kicks from running the show, but she's also very angry at Mary. She thinks that Mary should have been helping her with her project. Imagine how Martha felt the next morning. As she thought about the previous day, she might have become even more angry. Jesus had rebuked her, publicly. Think of the embarrassment she felt. Martha's thinking: "If Mary had just been well mannered, considerate, responsible, and not left it all up to me, everything would have been fine." We all do that – make the problem out there, not in us.

Maybe this incident remained so painful to Martha that she couldn't reflect on it. I hope not. Instead, I hope that she thought about what Jesus had said and began to allow that maybe Mary did the right thing to settle in at his feet and to listen to him. Perhaps a week later, Martha's anger had mostly passed, and a month later she felt no grudge at all toward Mary. Perhaps, three months later she could admit that Mary had made the right decision and that she had been wrong. Perhaps, in six months, Martha could even laugh at herself and joke about her foolishness. Perhaps, she could have moved more quickly to that point, say in a month. Or, maybe it took a couple of years to get to that point. Either way, it's good news; it's growth, movement.

Jesus promises you and me that he will transform our lives. If we allow him, he shows us what we most need, and as we put what is most needful at the center of our lives, he changes us. That kind of change, that growth, doesn't happen all at once. It takes time. But have no doubt – it is the Holy Spirit working in us.

If Martha gave herself the time, the space, the silence, if she could slow down, calm down a bit and reflect on this incident, she may have learned three things, she may have begun to change in three ways, three ways the Holy Spirit was working in her.

First, Martha had a problem with Mary, but she didn't take it to Mary. Martha was indirect. She complained to Jesus. If you had a sibling while you were growing up, you know exactly what's going on here. Two children get in a squabble, and the more aggrieved child runs to a parent and demands the parent to declare judgment, to provide relief, to take care of the problem. Parents choose whether to referee constantly or to try to help their children develop the ability to resolve their problems.

Jesus is very clear about what to do when two people have differences. He says, "If someone hurts you, first go and tell him. Try to work out it between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along and try again. If still he won't listen, tell the church, make your dispute public." (Mt 18:15–16)

Instead of calling Mary aside and talking to her, Martha runs to daddy, the authority figure. She doesn't assume responsibility to help resolve her problem. She's looking for a pronouncement from on high, judgment in her favor. She's not looking for mending her relationship with Mary. She's looking for Mary's submission.

I think that the Holy Spirit helped Martha to learn how she could be respectful of Mary and to accept more responsibility for her relationships.

Second, Martha thought that she was the hospitable one. She's hustling and bustling, but true hospitality is about giving attention to your guest, being present to the other person. In two short sentences, Martha refers to herself three times: "Lord do you not care that my sister has left **me** to do all the work by **myself**? Tell her to help **me**." Martha is being selfish. She doesn't see beyond herself. She's not really providing hospitality or welcoming Jesus. Instead, she's trying to recruit Jesus, her guest, to help her accomplish own project. She's trying to use him. True hospitality isn't manipulative for our own purpose.

I think that the Holy Spirit helped Martha to learn how she was prone to put herself before Jesus.

Third, Martha focused on the details. She's preparing and organizing and planning. She's distracted from what matters most. Jesus tells her the essential part of being a disciple is listening to him.

I think that the Holy Spirit helped Martha to learn that it's easy to be distracted from what's most important, from our relationship with Jesus.

People, and communities, become distracted by many things and lose sight of what is needful. What's most important? Why are you a Christian? Asking ourselves those questions repeatedly helps bring us back to the heart of our faith. When I'm confused or upset about things, I find it helpful to come back to what's most important. I find it a spring of new life, growth, renewal: what is most needful?

Regularly reading the Bible, coming to mass, saying our prayers – these all can help keep us focused on what's needful. For me, what is most helpful is making 20 to 30 minutes a day to be quiet, to sit in silence, to try to be still. For me, to become more aware of God, there's nothing as important as trying to shut up, trying to turn off the thoughts and distractions, trying to be present fully in the moment, trying to be there for God.

There are countless spiritual disciplines, other ways to make space for God

in your life. It might be taking long walks, reading great books, keeping a journal, talking with close friends. But in themselves our spiritual practices and devotions do not give us spiritual growth. You can be going to mass daily, reading through the Bible a couple times a year, saying endless prayers, and be spiritually dead.

Remember the Pharisee who went to the Temple and prayed, reminding God that he fasted and tithed, that he was devout and followed the rules, but he wasn't moving more deeply into God's life. (Luke 18:11) To the contrary, he was moving the other way, trying to save himself; he made it about his own effort. Spiritual growth is a gift. It's grace. It's free. It's living in the Holy Spirit. That means engaging in what really matters to us, in what makes us feel alive. That means we try to hear Jesus and follow him, accepting that we're going to mess up a lot along the way, but that's okay. The Holy Spirit is still changing our lives, enlarging us.

It's not the Holy Spirit that has Martha fussing and distracted. It's the Holy Spirit that moves Martha from worrying about details to seeing what's needful. It's the Holy Spirit that moves Martha from being indirect and manipulative to being respectful and accepting responsibility. It's the Holy Spirit that moves Martha from resentment to being able to laugh at herself. It's the Holy Spirit that moves Martha from being selfish to being able to make space in her life for Jesus. The growth is steady and real and deep. It doesn't happen like the flick of a switch.

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