

Martha and Mary

and the Question of Being Happy Singles

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Church of the Nazarene

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For our evening together, for our little reflection,

I would like to explore with you a passage from the gospel of Luke (10:38-42).

It is a passage, which will serve as a wonderful springboard to answering the question,

“How can we be happy singles?”

It is the story of two single women...

As they continued their journey he entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary (who) sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me." The Lord said to her in reply, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

This is a very interesting, very intimate encounter between Jesus and two sisters which I think sheds much light on our lives as Christian singles—and I deliberately say “our lives”.

I do include myself in this category.

I am in the same singles boat; and I indeed say *boat*—not *cruise ship*!

A cruise ship is for finding a mate: some of us will *remain* single.

Most of you entertain the hope of finding a mate, of finding a significant other.

Some of us no longer have that hope—not because it is a lost cause (!),

but because we have given that hope to the Lord,

and welcome Him as our Significant Other.

I do not want it to sound like my situation is desperate!

Au contraire: I consider my situation to be privileged. I will perhaps come back to this.

As I said, I think that this passage sheds much light on our lives as Christian singles, as persons trying to engage Christ in a personal way, persons who are surely very active. Being single, as you know, can be very challenging, and the challenge, i.e. the affective desert in which we sometimes seem to find ourselves, leads to much activity, to much busyness, to much “Martha”.

In this encounter, Jesus declares to Martha, who is complaining that Mary is a poor hostess, that Mary has “chosen the better part.”—o which I would have been tempted to respond, had I been there, “Well, no ____ Sherlock: to sit dreamily at your feet is the better part—as opposed to setting the table, finishing the hors d’oeuvres, and making drinks, etc.”

What is Jesus saying?

What is Jesus revealing?

Is Jesus saying that hospitality is over-rated?

Is Jesus condemning Martha’s efforts?

If Mary has chosen the better part, then what she has chosen sheds light.

It is in the light of Mary, in the light of what her choice manifests, that we can rightly consider Martha,

and what ought to animate her activity, her generosity.

Often it is said: Mary is the contemplative one, and Martha is the active one.

There is truth to the distinction, but it is perhaps too simplistic.

Mary *has* chosen the better part.

But the fact is that she is not lifting a finger—which *is* a problem.

She is failing when it comes to hospitality.

How can Jesus condone such inconsideration and irresponsibility?

In reading parables or encounters of Christ,
we must always recall that Jesus' focus is most often very *specific*.
There is often *one* or *two* points that Jesus is highlighting and seeking to make.
You will notice that Jesus does *not* directly comment on Mary's lack of participation.
Jesus does not downplay her seeming laziness in any way.
Jesus is quite simply highlighting Mary's rapport with Him.
He is *not* highlighting her inactivity or her rapport with Martha.
Jesus is simply highlighting Mary's rapport with Him.
In other words, this is about *Jesus*, not about Martha.
Martha's problem is that she is not looking at Jesus enough.
She is looking at herself and at Mary.
It is here that she goes awry, and, in the process, gets terribly frustrated!

The focus is Jesus, and *relationship—with Him*,
not the circumstances surrounding His presence, or the other persons present.
And just as Jesus is not commenting on Mary's inactivity,
Jesus is not criticizing Martha's *activity*.
Hospitality *is* of grave importance (e.g. Rm. 12:13; IP 4:9).
Indeed, in our society, we have lost a sense of it—quite unfortunately:
the art of hospitality, whereby, with warmth and refinement,
we engage and serve others and help them to be at peace.
Mary seems to be missing *that* boat—*seems* to be, for such, once again, is not the point.
Mary's choice of “the better part”
highlights the focus (always) in our lives as friends of Jesus.
Martha, to an extent, is missing *that* boat.
She, of course, is not missing it completely.
Otherwise, she would not be playing Martha Stewart—which she does out of love.
But, because she is “peeking” at Mary's relationship with Jesus,
she is depriving herself of all that could be in *her* encounter with Christ.

So, what does Jesus seek to do with Martha?

To turn her gaze towards Him—quite simply.

That is His purpose.

Martha had a point regarding Mary, but there is a task more urgent at hand for Jesus:

- *to turn Martha's gaze*
- to liberate Martha of her worry and anxiety

by drawing her to His heart and into His love.

And it is from Jesus' heart that she can go forth to serve—with great zeal and enthusiasm.

Going forth from His heart will make her service very different.

And herein lies one of the things Jesus seeks to reveal.

We are all rather busy persons, active persons—especially as single persons, who easily get caught in the whirlwind of modern society and its often unbridled pace.

In other words, stillness is generally not our pastime.

Indeed, we are *supposed* to be active in our lives.

We can perhaps organize our schedules differently so that we have more—important—quiet time.

But such is not Jesus' primary point.

Jesus is not simply saying that we should stop to smell the roses—be that a tremendous thing.

Jesus is talking about *coming to and going forth from His heart*, the “better part”.

Jesus has come to our “home” to encounter us and to engage relationship, a relationship that requires great loving focus, but that is not put “on hold”

- when we are active
- when we engage the many activities of daily life.

Although psychologically the two do not meet well,

contemplation (“heart-to-heart” with God) and activity are not opposed.

It is true that they *seem* to be opposed.

Contemplation does require a certain stillness.

Activity requires movement.

We generally know when we are not praying: when we are busy!

But, if the two can engage the same love

- they can *not* be opposed
- they *are not* opposed.

Let us recall our great privilege as Christians:

we have been gifted, graced by God with a love from above

Catholics believe that this is normally received at Baptism.

This love has been traditionally called the gift of *charity*

—which, unfortunately, today has taken on the connotation of “soup kitchens”.

This special love binds us to Christ, enables us

- to befriend Christ
- to be in a relationship with the Trinity.

And, interestingly, amazingly, *the same love*

- binds us to one another
- puts us in a new relationship with one another.

The new commandment is all about this.

This love—as regards one another—is sometimes called fraternal charity.

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

The new commandment only makes sense

if Jesus gives us a divine love, “charity”

which is a participation in the Holy Spirit—“as I have loved you”.

And so, the same love is engaged in our relationship with Jesus and with one another
—if we so desire.

This permits Saint John to say (1st epistle: 4:12):

“If we love one another, God remains in us, and His love is brought to perfection in us”.

And so, our daily activities, our hospitality, our busyness—which sometimes distracts us,
ought to and can be an expression of, an exercise of divine love,
which then roots us in Jesus’ heart all the more.

The words in Hebrews (13:2) make such sense:

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect hospitality,
for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.”

This is very important for us as single persons.

Let’s face it: most of us often struggle with intimacy issues.

And the apparent void leads to much busyness.

If only we were to realize more that everything can be an opportunity
to be intimate with Jesus.

Instead of hiding in our busyness, we could seize opportunities to love Him in others.

Martha and Mary were single women.

Jesus came into their home.

In the Scriptures, the home often symbolizes the heart.

The gentleman who beseeches Jesus to help his dying son,
and declares that He is unworthy to have Jesus under his roof,
is declaring that he is unworthy to have Jesus engage his heart...

Jesus comes to be *the* Significant Other in our life.

He does not simply come as

- a bestower of blessings
- the grand cheer-leader who encourages us live good human lives.

Jesus comes to care for our needs for intimacy at all times, in all situations.

We must choose Him as the better part.

Then does He become the resting place for our heart.

Some of you may be familiar with the beautiful, famous quote from Saint Augustine (+430): “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

In my life, I look to some of what Catholics call “saints”, holy ones,
for insight and reassurance regarding this intimacy to which I am called with Christ.

Saints are persons whom the Christian community has recognized

—based on testimony and even miracles, lived in particular intimacy with Christ.

I would like to read a few quotes, i.e. for us to share in their reassuring insight

regarding what Jesus wants for us.

You are a fire that takes away coldness, illuminates the mind with its light, and causes me to know Your truth. And I know that You are beauty and wisdom itself. The food of angels, You give Yourself to man in the fire of your love.

St. Catherine of Siena [Born in 1347, the 25th child of a wool dyer in northern Italy, St. Catherine started having intense spiritual experiences when she was only 6, supposedly seeing guardian angels as clearly as the people they protected. She committed herself to Christ a particular way at the age of 16, and labored for unity in the Christian church. Her writings are still read today. She died in 1380, when she was only 33, and her body was found incorrupt in 1430.]

It is not said, “May the joy of thy Lord enter into thee,” but “Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord,” which is a proof that the joy will be greater than we can conceive. We shall enter into a sea of divine and eternal joy, which will fill us within and without, and surround us on all sides.

St. Robert Bellarmine +1621

The interior life is like a sea of love in which the soul is plunged and is, as it were, drowned in love. Just as a mother holds her child’s face in her hands to cover it with kisses, so does God hold us.

St. John Vianney +1859

By virtue of love is the lover transformed into the beloved and the beloved into the lover, and the like unto hard iron which so assumeth the colour, heat, and virtue of the fire that it almost turneth into fire, so doth the soul, united with God through the perfect grace of divine love, itself almost become divine and transformed into God.

O marvelous, indescribable and joyous love, in Thee is all savour and sweetness and all delight, the contemplation whereof exalteth the soul above the world, making it able to stand alone in joy, and peace, and rest.

Angela de Foligno [born in Foligno, Italy, in 1248, Angela married and had several children. Wealthy, she took part in the social events of the city until 1285, when she had some sort of vision of the Lord, following which she became a member of the Franciscan Third Order. When her husband died, she gave away her possessions and started a community devoted to the care of the needy. She died in 1309]

As these quotes suggest, we have been endowed with a special love that binds us to Christ, that makes us thirst for Christ, a love which, as we stated, *also* binds us to one another, which we can exercise—if we choose—with respect to those whom we encounter.

This means that, when it is exercised, it draws us into deeper intimacy with Christ. Intimacy with Christ should and can animate our days—no matter what we may be doing. Our contemplation extends into our activity, which, in turn, leads to deeper contemplation.

Now, even though I do not think it is the primary point that Jesus is making in his encounter with Martha and Mary, we do need quiet time, the quiet time which allows us to draw close to Christ's heart in a very deliberate and focused way. It is indispensable—especially when one considers that one of the most precious things that we can give to God is time; and, in giving Him time, we very concretely let Him provide—including for our intimacy needs.

Quiet time is indispensable.

We need that silent heart-to-heart, in which we lay ourselves before the Lord, in which we taste his goodness in a particular way—especially us busy singles.

We need to be honest about the busyness that is sometimes designed to fill what we perceive to be a void.

Now, circumstance, however, does sometime objectively impedes such quiet time.

What does one then do? Panic?

No! There is intimacy to be had with Christ at all times—if we so desire.

Silent interior prayer is irreplaceable,

but wanting intimacy with Christ is already a form of intimacy.

And so one can consecrate his/her activities to God, asking that they

- be done in divine love
- serve divine love.

Our activities can be contemplative at their heart.

Martha lost sight of this; hence, her agitation...

In this light, every activity acquires a whole new dimension, and the most mundane things become opportunities to love Jesus.

Remember that it is not a question of doing things *for* Jesus.

This was another lesson for Martha.

Jesus is fine. He needs nothing done for Him.

What He would like is a relationship with us.

And He gifts our hearts

so that we be able to make use of every activity for the sake of that relationship.

A question that arises sometimes:

if I am making use of activities and encounters with other persons

for the sake of my relationship with Jesus,

how engaged am I truly with respect to the other person?

Am I not in fact ignoring the other person?

I have had people say, "I want you to love *me*, not just Jesus in me.

Jesus' presence does not compete with the person whom he indwells.

Jesus' presence never obscures the other person: *au contraire*.

His presence is luminous and enables me to see more clearly.

And His love envelops the other person such that I more truly love that person for who he/she is.

Loving Christ who indwells another person leads me to love the other person more.

This is only true with God.

If I love another human person for the sake of another human person

(i.e. a friend's friend), I am not really love that person for who they are.

And so our focal point, as single Christians, is Jesus' heart.

His heart is the better part.

His heart is our home.

His heart is our refuge.

His heart is our place of intimacy.

We can only continue to abide in His heart, however, in all that we do, if we encounter His heart, which means spending time with His heart.

I could go on and on, but I will leave you with some food for thought,
a testimony of sorts, that may help on days it is more difficult being single.

From the early days of the Christian church,
there have been persons who are single for the Lord.

They discovered that this greater love with which they are loved
can suffice for the human heart.

We are indeed talking about a greater love.

It is true that Jesus is very hidden, and his love is not always felt,
which is challenging, for we like to feel.

His love is deeper than feeling.

Now, some of you may be thinking, I have not chosen to be single for the Lord.

I want to be “for the Lord”, but the single stuff just happens to be my current lot.

Well, know that, as you await the find, the catch, this greater love can and does suffice
for your human heart.

Do not hesitate to be utterly honest with Jesus
and express your struggles with loneliness,
or whatever may be burdensome in being single.

Such expression will only serve your intimacy with Him.

Let Him suffice for your heart...