

A WORD IN EDGEWISE
Sermon for Pentecost 9C (Proper 11)
LPC, 7/17/16

Last week I had a computer crisis and spent three hours on the phone with tech support. I became aware, partway through this ordeal, that my spiritual resources were running low, understandably enough. Then I realized that I had not taken my quiet time with God that morning. I quickly rectified the situation and felt much better.

The morning of my son's wedding two weeks ago, I joined the other females in the wedding party at the home of my daughter-in-law's parents, where we all had our hair styled. The bride's aunt unexpectedly left the room and returned with a small book of devotions, and led us all, hairdressers included, in a short meditation about grounding in God. I don't know if that was the reason the ensuing festivities were a blessing from beginning to end, but it sure didn't hurt.

The fact is, that spending quiet time with God is never a waste of time, no matter how busy we are, or how fraught the situation. I remember hearing about a wealthy philanthropist who maintained a punishing schedule of flying around the world to attend to his various charitable projects. People asked him how he kept up his frenetic pace, and he replied that except on his most heavily scheduled days, he spent an hour in prayer. When asked about his busiest days, he said "Why then, on those days, I spend two hours in prayer."

St. Ignatius Loyola, whom you know is one of my heroes, developed a method of prayer especially suited to his friars who were active in worldly ministry. Some of his friars asked him when they got really tied up in teaching and ministry, could they shorten their prayers, and Ignatius said absolutely not! If you don't have time for both prayer and ministry, cut back on the ministry, never on prayer.

These things come to mind when I contemplate this familiar story of Martha and Mary. Mary, who sits at the feet of Jesus to listen to him, is said to have chosen "the better part," while Martha, going to some trouble for the sake of her guest's comfort, is said to be busy and distracted with too many things.

This story has been interpreted to endorse a monastic calling over a domestic calling, but this is a misread. Clearly both prayer and action are part of a disciple's life. In the Friends of St. Lawrence meeting last week we listed characteristics of prayerful people, and we all agreed that a prayerful person's life of prayer is born out in action.

Lest we denigrate the life of action as represented by Martha, I will point out that it was Martha who invited the Lord into her home. Mary would not have had the opportunity to sit at Jesus' feet if Martha had not provided it.

I will also point out that in the story we heard last week of the Good Samaritan, it was the two professionals in the quiet activities of prayer and study, the priest and the Levite, who passed by the stricken man in the road, presumably to keep themselves clean for their communion with God. The Samaritan, on the other hand, was the one to get his hands dirty. I've put a book of

illustrations of the Good Samaritan in the narthex so you can see how hard that man had to work. Yet he, like Mary, is presented to us as an example to emulate.

I propose that instead of lifestyle choices, what Mary and Martha represent are the interior and the exterior lives that all of us lead simultaneously. We are all Martha and we are all Mary. Not only are both the interior and exterior lives both necessary, they are mutually dependent. Prayer provides context and motivation for action. Action is where prayer becomes incarnate. Both prayer and action are part of Christian discipleship.

What Martha does demonstrate is how easy it is for human beings to get carried away with their activities, especially when the one we are working for is the Lord. Our culture, with its emphasis on accomplishment and its abhorrence of silence, further encourages us to neglect our quiet time with God.

Yet action, even the activity of ministry, is meaningless without a foundation in our relationship with God. And, what Jesus and all of the saints make clear is that our relationship with God is cultivated in quiet prayer. That may not be the only way to cultivate relationship with God, but no Christian life is complete without some sort of contemplative element, where we are still and just spend time with God.

Why do we suppose that our relationship with God is different from any human relationship we have? All relationships require the parties to spend some time together. Sometimes of necessity it's phone time or internet time or even letter time. (Yes, some people still write letters!) But relationships will founder without both parties investing time in being together in some way.

What this also means is that you have to allow both parties a chance to speak. If our prayer time consists entirely of telling God our concerns without letting God get a word in edgewise, we are hogging the conversation, which isn't fair to any relationship.

So, if we do set aside time for God, and manage to quiet our own outer and inner voices, what might we hear from God's side? The human mind abhors a vacuum, and when we get quiet, we can't seem to keep all kinds of stuff from popping into our heads.

Here's where the experience of the saints is so helpful. The saints suggest setting aside a regular time each day for quiet, a minute, or five or twenty. Setting a timer may be helpful. Sit in a neutral posture: back straight, feet on the floor, eyes closed. And just be quiet, gently returning the attention to God when it wanders. Many people suggest using a sacred word, like "Jesus," or "love," repeated with each breath. Some repeat a prayer like the so-called "Jesus Prayer:" "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." One saint suggests simply focusing on the desire for God. And still others use a phrase of scripture.

Of the latter, I suggest something like an excerpt from Isaiah 43: "Thus says the Lord: You are precious in my sight, and I love you." This is the kind of thing God says to people who sit at Jesus' feet and let God get a word in edgewise. Is this not, in every way, the better part? "You are precious in my sight and I love you." There was surely something of this in what Mary heard at Jesus's feet, and if we sit where she sat, we place ourselves where we can hear it too.