

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus comes to visit his close friends, Mary and Martha. You can think of Martha as the original Martha Stewart. She is honored to have Jesus as a guest in her home, so she scraps her ordinary everyday menu of soup and bread and decides to create a banquet fit for a messiah. Let's imagine her pulling out all her cookbooks, sending one servant to the field to slaughter a lamb, and another to the market to pick up a few luscious pomegranates. Like a military general, she barks commands to her kitchen staff. Soak the lentils! Pound the grain! Knead the dough! So many things to do and so little time. Is the silver polished? Do the centerpiece and napkins match? Does she have the proper wine? What should she serve for dessert? Her mind races as she rushes around the kitchen. Then all of a sudden she realizes that her sister, who's supposed to be helping her, is nowhere in sight. Martha finds out from a servant that Mary is in the living room, listening to Jesus. Martha is furious. She would LOVE to be sitting with Jesus, too, but she has to make sure that the meal is just perfect. The more Martha thinks about Mary visiting with Jesus, the more resentful and stressed out she becomes. She's going to punish Mary for her inconsiderate behavior. Instead of quietly asking Mary to join her in the kitchen, she's going to get Jesus to publicly rebuke Mary. So she charges into the living room, interrupts the conversation, and demands that Jesus tell Mary to help her.

As we know, Martha's strategy backfires. Instead of rebuking Mary, Jesus rebukes Martha. But he does so very gently. He tells her she is too worried and distracted. In the original Greek, both words connote being pulled apart or dragged away. Martha is indeed being pulled apart by too many things on her mind, and her determination to have the perfect banquet is dragging her away from what's really important.

Jesus is NOT rebuking Martha for being hospitable and providing a meal. Hospitality was a supreme value in ancient cultures. Jesus and his disciples were dependent on the hospitality of people like Martha; they could not have done their ministry without it. The problem is that Martha, in her attempt to provide Jesus with the best meal possible, is breaking a primary rule of hospitality by neglecting to pay proper attention to her guest. Jesus' primary wish is for people to hear his words. Martha is so distracted and worried that she misses out on spending time with Jesus and listening to him.

At this point in the gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to die. It is urgent that people listen to his message before it is too late. He is the Word of God physically present to them, and they must pay attention. Earlier in Luke's gospel, at Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, God spoke to Peter and James and John who were with Jesus, telling them, "This is my Son...listen to him!" It was urgent then, and it's urgent now. In Martha's preoccupation with domestic details, she is missing out. She's forgetting that listening to Jesus is what will really nourish her.

When Martha neglects to listen to Jesus, she misses out on the most important thing of all: intimacy with God. Discipleship certainly involves service to others. But our service to others, our loving God and our neighbor, needs to be grounded in an intimate relationship with God, or else we become stressed out, angry, and empty, like Martha. We need to be fed by spiritual food, or else we won't have the strength and compassion to tend the wounds and needs of others. And intimacy with God involves listening to God: in prayer, in quiet, in Sunday worship, in Bible study, in reverent reflection. Martin Luther once wrote in his diary, "I have so much to do today, I had better spend an extra hour in prayer." Remember, Jesus certainly *did* a lot of things: teachings, healings, exorcisms. But all of his actions were book-ended by time spent alone. He was always going off by himself, away from his disciples and the crowds, to pray. To be alone in relationship with God. Jesus drew sustenance from intimacy with God. He could never have done his ministry without it. He could never have gone to the cross without it.

There is another important way in which we can listen to God, and that is by listening to each other. After all, if we believe that human beings are created in God's image, if we believe that we are to seek and serve Christ in all persons, as we profess in our Baptismal Covenant, then taking the time to listen, really listen, to the stories others have to share is a way to listen to God. When we listen to others, even if we disagree with them, we are validating their experiences, their humanity, and the presence of Christ within them. Listening builds relationships, with God and with each other.

I truly believe that one of the reasons we find ourselves in such great trouble and turmoil as a nation right now is that we have not been listening to one another. For example, those of us who are privileged by virtue of our education or income have rarely listened to the stories of less educated or well-off workers whose manufacturing jobs have evaporated because companies have moved overseas. No wonder those workers are angry; not only have their jobs disappeared and their towns been decimated, but no one has been taking their experiences seriously; no one has heard their voices; no one has listened to their stories.

We see, of course, the same thing in race relations. I can't change my skin color, but I can listen to someone whose skin color is different from mine. When I was in seminary and doing my summer hospital chaplaincy program, one of my colleagues at the medical center was a bright, articulate, African American woman studying to be a Presbyterian minister at very prestigious divinity school. She shared with me some stories of the dismissive and demeaning treatment she received from the white students and professors there. "I feel erased," she told me at one point. Her story puts in a nutshell the whole underpinning of the Black Lives Matter movement. It's not that *only* black lives matter, but rather that black lives matter, *too*. My colleague was being treated as if her opinions, her ministry, her life did not matter. She felt erased.

Everyone has stories. Those of us who are heterosexual need to listen to members of the LGBT community. Those of us not in law enforcement need to hear from police officers about what it is like to put their lives on the line day in and day out. Studies show that reconciliation between individuals and groups happens when relationships are created, and relationships are created when people listen and take seriously one another's stories.

Here, for example, is something a friend of mine posted on Facebook a couple of days ago. She wrote:

"I don't really ever post stuff like this. I usually use Facebook as a way to share embarrassing pictures of my children. But I wanted to share my experience. It moved me....Last night I had dinner with a woman I had never met before. As we got to know each other, we talked about how sometimes we loved our children so much it actually hurt. We discussed how family is so important but sometimes you have to create your own family when you live far from home. We laughed about how for both of us, dirty laundry was our nemesis and how we both grew up helping our moms hang the laundry out to dry. We smiled and laughed through dinner and looked at our kids and wished that for a moment, time would stop because seeing them grow up was sometimes hard. We both complimented each other on how we both were trying and sometimes succeeding at raising smart and loving kids.

"All of these things we shared. We hoped. We dreamed. We loved. And yet, there we sat, two very different people. Me: white woman, Catholic Christian, American. Her: Muslim, Displaced Syrian visiting Kentucky from Qatar, wearing a hijab. But I realized we aren't different at all. Why can't we realize that we are not different. We all want happiness. We all want love. Our differences are so small. Our similarities are so much bigger....Mother Teresa said it best: 'If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.'"

Listening, deep listening, is a special practice through which we make ourselves fully present to God and to others. To listen to another, and to be truly listened to, is a gift through which the uniqueness of every individual is honored. Thus we are transformed, our hearts and souls are expanded, and we become fully alive.

Unlike worried and distracted Martha, Mary, as she sat at Jesus' feet, was both fully present and focused on listening to him. She had set aside other thoughts and concerns in order to give Jesus her full and undivided attention. When we, like Mary, intentionally set aside ourselves to listen to another, we are inviting and welcoming God and others into our hearts, and we are engaged in intimate relationship with the divine.