

*Quality Time with Jesus*  
*Psalm 46; Luke 10:38-42*  
*August 5, 2007*

A few years ago on one of the major holidays, we hosted family members and friends for dinner. Afterward Mark and I realized that we spent most of the day in the kitchen preparing the meal and cleaning up after the meal. We had spent little quality time with the family and friends who had come to spend the day with us. Since that day, we have tried to plan simple menus for holiday meals. We prepare as many things as possible ahead of time; the dishes left for that day take less time to prepare. We don't bring out the fine china; we use the everyday plates that can go in the dishwasher, saving time and effort. The purpose of simplification is to focus on the more important aspect of the day: relationships.

In this morning's Gospel reading, we find Martha busily engaged in the kitchen, preparing a meal that will honor and nourish Jesus. She wants Jesus to feel welcome and comfortable in her home, and she puts a good deal of work into offering him hospitality. As the day wears on, Martha grows tired, anxious and frustrated with her sister, whom she feels is neglecting her responsibilities. Instead of taking her traditional role in the kitchen with the women, Mary has been sitting at Jesus' feet with the men.

Finally Martha blows her fuse and turns not to Mary, but to Jesus with her complaint. "Sir, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Jesus does not reply as Martha hopes. He says, "Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part."

Jesus' rebuke of Martha is not a put-down of domestic responsibilities. It is a call to examine priorities and attitudes. Martha's worries about the tidiness of the house and the delicacies of the meal have distracted her from the purpose of Jesus' visit: to be in relationship with Mary and Martha. Perhaps Martha has fallen into the trap of earning Jesus' approval with her gracious hospitality. In her anxiety to make the occasion special, she seeks to control the situation. Whether she is led astray by the need for approval or control, Martha's attitude turns sour. She loses all sense of joy in the service of her Lord. Her discipleship is fueled and flawed by an angry self-righteousness. When we do things for the wrong reason and in the wrong spirit, a hard-hearted, judging attitude begins to grow inside. Jesus is calling Martha to stop her frenzied activity, to consider what she is doing and why, and to assess the importance of her activity.

The real concern of the story is how we live as disciples of Jesus Christ. Certainly Jesus teaches us to be active disciples, loving our neighbors, caring for the least, serving the downtrodden, or bearing our crosses. But Jesus' word to Martha makes it clear that in addition to rushing off to be a Good Samaritan at the hurting edges of the world, in addition to serving at the crossroads of human need, we need to spend some time in God's presence being fueled for service. We need to take time to sit at Jesus' feet, as Mary was doing, listening to God's Word in Jesus' teaching, growing in a life-transforming relationship with Jesus, discerning how God is calling us to act. Disciples of Jesus need to spend quality time in relationship with their teacher.

For the first century Jew, sitting at someone's feet was a symbolic act of a student. Disciples sitting at the feet of rabbis were not passive listeners. There was usually lively dialogue and debate between students and teacher. In the first century it was men who were both students and teachers. The fact that Jesus allows Mary to sit at his feet demonstrates his inclusive style and embrace of everyone. A disciple of Jesus takes time to sit at Jesus' feet to listen to God's Word. This is one of the ways we express and grow in our love of God.

Eugene Peterson's translation of the phrase "better part" as "the main course"<sup>1</sup> helps us recognize that "Jesus is the host, not Mary or Martha or any of us. Jesus spreads the word like a banquet to nourish and strengthen us."<sup>2</sup> That's the purpose of sitting at Jesus' feet – to be spiritually refreshed for faithful living and service.

When we pause and cease our endless treadmill of activity, when we are still in God's presence, we receive the gift of grace. In listening to God's word and opening our hearts to God's blessings, we receive the gift of knowing that we are valued for who we are, not for what we do. We live in an activist culture which measures our worth by our productivity. It is easy to translate this mindset into a works-centered spirituality, in which we believe that we have to prove our faith or earn God's love through our works. We can be too busy serving God's purpose that we neglect the sense of God's presence in our work. We can be so goal-oriented, agenda-driven and results-conscious, hurrying to do what needs to be done, that we never take time to listen and we forget why we are in such a hurry. We can become so distracted by the immediate task at hand that we miss the deeper meanings God would reveal to us in the process. If we are honest, our busyness often hides our emptiness. When we are still long enough to sit at Jesus' feet, we find the grace that we need to fill our emptiness. In Jesus' presence we learn that we are enough, we are valued, and we are loved just

as we are. We are received and embraced with our gifts and our gaps. Our ceaseless striving after success is not what is necessary. Resting in God's presence reminds us that we are accepted as we are.

Three monks made their annual trip to visit a wise and holy man. Two of the brothers asked many questions and shared thoughts and dreams, but the third companion remained silent and spoke not a word. After many visits the Teacher spoke to the silent brother. "Though you come here often, you ask no questions." Smiling, the brother replied, "It is enough just to be with you, father."

May we choose to sit at Jesus' feet for the main course, listening attentively to God's Word and receiving God's blessing of love and grace. A little quality time spent with Jesus yields rich rewards.

God of the still morning sunrise, may your deep peace dawn upon our souls. We run through life at such a hectic pace that we are often not aware of your presence. Slow us down, O God, so that we might revel in the beauty around us and drink deep of the refreshment you provide. Artist of the colorful sunset, in the depths of night may we rest in the palm of your hand, entrusting our worries to you. Even in moments of sleep you are with us, speaking to us in dreams and renewing our bodies for service.

We are grateful for the luxury that we have to care for ourselves and to enjoy leisure activities. We know that too many are anxious for bread and shelter that they cannot pause for personal renewal. Lead us in a greater sharing of our wealth so that the basic needs of all your people might be met.

We are grateful for the freedom we enjoy to worship you and to dwell in your presence, O God. Draw us ever closer in relationship to you, so that we might grow in faith manifested in our daily living....

<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993), p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Frey, “Living with Martha, *Christian Century*, July 13, 2004, p. 16.

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