

Big, special occasion dinners have changed a lot at my parents' house since I was a young child. Today if you were to visit my parents' during such an occasion you would first be told that we will be eating at about 6:00 pm or whatever the goal time is. This time is not set in stone, it could change, and you can show up whenever you want, just don't expect to have perfect meal on the table at 6. Meal preparation involves multiple people: my mom, my dad, sisters, brother, brother-in-law, Michael, Hailey and me when we are there. Conversation happens throughout the meal preparation. Once we are all at the table, the conversation pauses as people eat and enjoy the food, then the compliments start: everyone thanking whoever made the potatoes, or salad or meat or whatever, because it tastes so good. While big family meals are not formal, they are pleasant, enjoyable, and there is room for everyone at the table.

It wasn't always like this, however. Growing up I can remember these dinners as being dreaded. They were all at my house and my mother was expected to do all the work. She'd let us help set the table or prepare relishes, but all the real cooking was her responsibility. And it was expected dinner would be served at a certain time. My grandparents always arrived a half hour early, refused to help, and waited impatiently for the meal to be served. Inevitably, something always happened that prevented the meal from being served on time (the meat wouldn't be cooked, or a potatoes took longer) and then my grandparents got antsy, repeatedly announcing their displeasure that dinner was late. When we sat down to eat, my mom would always apologize for being late and only my dad said it really didn't matter. The food was always delicious, but I don't remember any one really appreciating our being together to enjoy it. After the meal was over, my mother was exhausted, cranky, and vowed she'd never do it again.

Finally my mother observed she wasn't enjoying the those special occasions because of all the distractions involved with putting the food on the table, and that is when those special occasion meals changed. No one seems to mind the change, and in fact, we seem to enjoy these occasions so much more. Because the change of involving all of us means all of us can participate in what the meals are really about: coming together. Now those distractions that used to plague my mother are pretty much gone, and we can focus on the better part of those celebrations.

That shift for my family's celebrations might be the very thing Jesus was pointing out to a woman named Martha in today's Gospel. This short story has inspired a lot of commentary and a lot of side taking. There is an unmistakable tension in this story, a tension Martha made no hesitation to voice, and if we aren't careful we can let that tension distract us into believing there is a conflict going on where there is a good side and a bad side. Too often this story is interpreted that it is Martha who is in wrong and her sister Mary who is in the right. However, going down that road means we miss the whole point, and will end up perhaps unintentionally, demeaning a person and her work. Some scholars who've gone down this road have gone so far as to say that the author of Luke is using this story to pit sister against sister in order to serve his own agenda of keeping women out of leadership roles in the early church, as Martha appears to be criticized by Jesus and Mary is praised for being silent and obedient. But I'm not sure the author of Luke is consistent with showing silent women as better in the rest of his Gospel. Instead, I believe this story can be incredibly tempting to misread simply because it may be so easy to relate to. It takes place in a home, it involves family, and although the text does implicitly say Martha is preparing dinner, it is so easy to imagine that is what is going on, because that may be an activity we can all relate to.

Then there is that tension, a tension not unlike what plagued my family celebrations for years, that can distract us because tension can make us uncomfortable, tension we might want to alleviate quickly and cleanly, a tension we, like Martha, might yearn and hope for Jesus to solve with one of his unexpected actions or parables or something.

But if that is what is expected from Jesus today, he is as disappointing as a hostess who did not put dinner on the table on time. However, there is still plenty of good news for us to feast upon.

Perhaps the first is that we don't have to look at this as a story of competition between sisters, because maybe there really isn't any competition. If you remember, the story begins with Martha welcoming Jesus into her home. This is no small sentence. Remember at the beginning of this chapter in Luke's Gospel there was a whole village that did not welcome him, and here we see someone welcoming him into her home. Notice this was her home, there is no mention of husband or brother or father in this story, only Martha and Mary. Two women Luke calls sisters who could be biological sisters or some scholars wonder if they might be missionary partners, reminiscent of when Jesus sent those 70 out in pairs. Either way, they are together in one house.

And we heard that while one sister sat at Jesus' feet and listened to everything he had to say, the other sister was distracted by many tasks. As I mentioned, it is really easy to imagine the many tasks means making a big dinner, but the Greek is not that specific. What is really interesting to me is the Greek word translated "distracted". This word is used nowhere else in the entire New Testament; only in this story do we see this word. Literally translated the word means, "to be pulled away from", or "pulled apart." That sounds pretty intense, and indicates these distractions are more than just Martha trying to catch a bunch more Pokémon on her Pokémon Go app before dinner. In fact when she speaks, the Greek could be interpreted that she isn't just distracted, or frustrated, she is overly anxious, maybe distraught.

Which might be why Jesus didn't tell Mary to get off her seat and help, but instead gave Martha what she really needed. She didn't need help as much as she needed to be reminded about the intention and purpose of that visit. If you remember, when Jesus replied to Martha's demand, he didn't criticize her work. He pointed out her worry and her anxiety over many things, whatever they were. The worry and the anxiety were what was getting in the way, they were what was causing her to miss the single most important thing: that Jesus himself was in her house, and he might have had something just for her. But she was missing it, because of the worry and anxiety which seemed to be pulling her away from him and making her think more about herself than anyone else.

I don't know about you, but I hear in Martha's request to Jesus an echo of the lawyer we heard about last week, the lawyer who asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life, and then asked who was his neighbor. To me, the lawyer seemed focused on himself. And Mary's distractions made her focus not on her houseguest, but on herself, and whatever challenges and worries she was facing. What the lawyer got in the answer of the Parable of the Good Samaritan was a look at himself, and that is the same thing Jesus gave Martha. Not to belittle or chastise her, but to free her from those anxiety causing distractions.

When Jesus said Mary had chosen the better thing, he was not saying she was better than Martha, he was not saying that Martha's work didn't matter or wasn't as important as listening to him. Instead, Jesus was giving Martha and all of us who do the work of ministry an important reminder. No matter what ministry we engage in: hospitality, coffee hour, serving free lunch, prayer shawls, altar guild, LEVs, KAIROS, acolytes, vestry, mowing the lawn, Soul Biscuits, teaching Sunday school, our Marthas, music, I could go on with the list of wonderful ministries we have here at Church of the Good Shepherd, the point is when any of us who are involved in these ministries get distracted by things like numbers, budget worries, parking, politics, the latest bad news, personal

preferences, weather or whatever pulls us away from the love of God in Christ, then we can become so distraught we can miss Christ in our midst. And Christ is in our midst, present in the Sacraments and so is the Holy Spirit, and he has something for us, something that will help empower us, something to help us keep going even when it gets hard or overwhelming or confusing. We can't do the work of serving Christ on our own, we need the love and new life and healing he has to give. We can't be Christ to this campus, community, or the world, unless we also love Christ, and receive his love for us.

Unfortunately, what Jesus doesn't give us is easy answers. He doesn't make it easy for us to say yes to one thing and no to another. Should we welcome the young people who have been coming to Good Shepherd to play a game on their phone or not? Should we do more outreach into the community or come up with new programs for campus ministry? And when we look at the opportunities that come our way as simple choices, any ministry can itself become a distraction, instead of remembering ministry, whatever ministry we do, is nothing more than an opportunity for us to help each other and those we have not met yet connect with Christ.

I see this when those who work hard to prepare and serve free lunch do more than purchase and prepare food, they talk with and listen to the people they serve. There are some wonderful Christ like relationships developing on Wednesdays, especially when someone we serve every week comes to tell me or someone else from the church they won't be coming for a few weeks because they'll be out of town and they didn't want us to be concerned. That reminds me free lunch is about a lot more than giving a free meal to whoever comes. I see this when of our members offer Pokémon Go players a Popsicle on a hot afternoon. I know you are offering more than food. We have so many ways our ministries are centered on Christ, and in these days of lots of distractions, some of which are necessary to deal with, it can be easy to let those distractions pull us away from Christ. Sometimes, it happens. When it does, we don't have to let the distractions take over, as we have both Martha and Mary to remind us that perhaps part of living our calling as Christians is how we handle distractions and we can leave those distractions for a time and go to Christ, in prayer, in worship, and be renewed to go and do the work he has given us to do.