

## The better part

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 18, 2010

*Martha...asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come help me." The Lord answered her, "Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her."* Luke 10:40-41

Jesus lived in a man's world. Some would claim that we still do, but if you put it in perspective, there have been great strides. When you consider the status of women in his time, it is all the more extraordinary that Jesus was way ahead of his time in relating to women and men on an equal basis.

In our gospel story today, Jesus is visiting in the home of Martha and Mary in Bethany where he is teaching. Martha is apparently the head of the household and, wanting to be hospitable, is preparing refreshments for the guests. Her sister Mary does not help, but joins the men in listening to Jesus. Meanwhile, Martha can be heard out in the kitchen banging pots and pans with mounting irritation because she has been left alone to do all the work of preparing the refreshments. When no one gets the hint, Martha goes in and boldly interrupts Jesus, "Don't you care that I'm out here in the kitchen having to do everything by myself?" Tell Mary to come in here and help me!"

Jesus understands Martha's annoyance, but defends Mary's right to learn. Martha is intent on the immediate task of providing hospitality for the guests while her sister wants to hear what Jesus has to say. When Jesus says that Mary has chosen the "better part," he is in no way demeaning Martha's concern for hospitality. For Mary, matters of the spiritual sustenance have priority over refreshments. We may wonder why Mary didn't help Martha prepare the food beforehand so that both of them could be there to listen to Jesus. We are also left with the question of why Jesus didn't invite Martha to join them. The fact is that the two sisters had different priorities.

In our present age, there are women who are still resistant to feminist thinking. It is not that radical to expect to be treated with the same respect given others. Given the choice, few women would accept anything less than equal pay for equal work. Few women would accept being denied opportunities for advancement for which they are equally qualified.

There is no need for women who choose to stay home and raise a family to feel defensive and be intimidated by career women. Both are free to have a career and a family or to make raising a family their career. Neither should be judgmental toward the other. Just because a woman chooses to remain home does not make her a better wife and mother any more than a woman who chooses to have a career and family is any less a wife and mother. The Mary's and the Martha's of this world both do important work and are free to do what they are called to do. It is curious why people question a woman handling both a family and a career but never question a man having the same.

Whether you are a type A active personality or a type B contemplative sort, both have a calling and each can benefit from the other. Today, women have far more opportunities than they did a generation ago. In Jesus' time, women had less opportunity to get an education. They were considered property of their fathers until such time as they married and were given over as

property to their husbands. Jesus overturned these societal norms to offer a new model of opportunity for women to learn and grow.

When it comes to learning about matters of the spirit, we all need to be nourished in both body and soul. The Martha in us needs to be nourished bodily while the Mary in us hungers for things of the spirit. Both are important. It is a matter of putting things into perspective. When we are nourished in the spirit here at the altar, we can do the most menial of tasks, whether in the garden, scrubbing the kitchen floor, cleaning the bathrooms, taking out the garbage, changing diapers and balancing the checkbook.

Katherine Graham, the late publisher of the *Washington Post*, was an example of a woman who came into being her own person. She was raised to be taken care of by her husband and was not expected to think for herself. She described herself as a doormat wife who wasn't supposed to know anything about world affairs, high finance or executive management. When she was suddenly left widowed with four children to raise it was expected that she would step aside to allow more seasoned men to take over the operation of the newspaper. With the encouragement of those who had confidence in her, Katherine Graham was transformed from being a shy and insecure widow unable to understand the intricacies of executive management into an able and outstanding publishing executive. The climate of attitudes toward women in executive positions was changing and she was part of that change. Her persistence and integrity prevailed in the face of intimidating power politics in the nation's capital. She was someone who grew into being her own person.

There are elements of both Mary and Martha in all of us. Just because we may put in extra hours at work doesn't necessarily mean that we are better workers. Part of being conscientious is to realize that family responsibilities are just as important as those of a career. Working long hours at the expense of family and friends is to confuse our priorities. For those who are passionate about what they do, they must not let it be at the expense of losing their health, their marriage or their family. A healthy life is one that integrates the proper balance of work, rest, and exercise while providing a model for younger generations.

All that we do in our lives begins here at the altar. Whatever else we do is consecrated to God. The spiritual strength we receive here flows into every other aspect of our lives, giving us the needed power, strength, and perspective for who we are and what we do.