

“...there is need of only one thing,” Jesus tells Martha: “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

I am a flaming “Martha.”

Am I the only Martha here concerned by Jesus’ choice of Mary, the “do nothing” contemplative, over Martha who is literally and figuratively putting bread on the table?

Let’s take a closer look at today’s Gospel to see what Jesus is really trying to tell us – Martha’s, Mary’s all.

Anybody who’s watched any season of the Chosen knows that Jesus is a “frequent flyer” on the “rubber chicken circuit.” Jesus eats with anybody and everybody. So when Jesus appears at the home of Martha and Mary, it’s not a stretch for Martha to think Jesus expects to be fed.

Martha jumps into action; Mary sits at Jesus’ feet, doing nothing – which is what contemplative’s do, according to Fr. Thomas Keating, a famous contemplative.

Although Mary is the one sitting at Jesus’ feet, Jesus has Martha’s number from the git go. Martha isn’t just anxious about feeding Jesus, she’s “worried and distracted” about “many things.”

“...there is only need of one thing.”

Clearly, for Jesus, putting dinner on the table isn’t the “one thing.”

But, neither is sitting at Jesus’ feet listening.

Jesus doesn’t tell Martha that Mary has chosen the best part, only that she has chosen the “better part” – better than being “worried and distracted by many things.”

So what is the “one thing?”

You’re all too young to remember the American actor Jack Palance...

Palance was a famous stage and screen actor, mostly known for his tough guy/villain roles that got him two Oscar nominations over 40 years – only to finally win an Oscar near the end of his career.

Somebody should have gotten a Pulitzer Prize for this exchange between the old cowboy Palance and young city slicker Billy Crystal in 1991. (Picture Palance and Crystal on horseback; Palance wearing a cowboy hat, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth...Crystal, in the saddle, but wearing a New York Mets baseball hat.)

Do you remember the name of the movie? How about Palance and Crystal's screen names? Listen for the "money" line.

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is?

Mitch: No, what?

Curly (holdup one finger): This.

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don't mean shit.

Mitch: That's great but, what's the one thing?

Curly: That's what you gotta figure out.

And that is exactly what Jesus is trying to help us do in today's Gospel.

Martha is trying to draw Jesus into a larger family drama: "Tell (Mary)...to help me." Jesus is having none of that, responding: "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Jesus knows He has Mary's ear; and by identifying the larger family dynamics at play, He now has Martha's. Perhaps now Martha will join Mary sitting at the Master's feet before they prepare the Lord's supper together.

Still, what is the "one thing" Jesus wants us to figure out?

I think we get closer to that "one thing" in the parable that precedes today's Gospel – the story of the Good Samaritan.

An expert in the law asks Jesus what he must "do to obtain eternal life." Jesus asks the lawyer what he reads in the law.

The expert: love God, love your neighbor.

Jesus: "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But the lawyer tries to get cute with Jesus and continues: "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus tells a story about a good Samaritan. A man traveling on the road, is robbed, beaten and left for dead. A Jewish priest sees the man lying along the road but passes by on the other side.

A Levite does likewise. But a Samaritan (the Samaritans are lepers to the Jews) who comes upon the man bandages his wounds and treats them with oil and wine. The Samaritan takes the victim to an Inn and pays for his care until he can return.

Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He says, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus says, "Go and do likewise."

Soooooooo, "...what is the one thing?"

Loving God, and loving my neighbor, the great commandment, is as close as I can come to figuring out what the "one thing" is for me. Following Jesus shows me how to do both. Jesus teaches me that there is "a time to listen and reflect, and a time to go and do."

We are called to be redeemed Martha's and Mary's, both/and.