

16 Sunday C

July 18, 2010

Cathedral

8:00 and Noon

Theme: Keeping in balance the two great commandments

Keeping balance in our lives.

This Sunday we hear about Mary, the sister of Martha, **“at the feet of Jesus,”** in rapt attention to his word and presence. Last Sunday, you remember, we heard the Good Samaritan story, about loving the neighbor in service.

Both go together—the two great commandments: loving God with all our heart, and loving the neighbor. Keeping balance: yes, it’s tough to keep the two great commandments in balance as we are called to follow Jesus in his journey to the cross.

In the fourth century the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Persia were peopled by men who lived as hermits. They sought closeness to Christ in solitude and simplicity. I want to read one of the famous sayings from one of the elders, who was called “Abbot,” that is, a hermit who had been tested in the desert for many years and proved himself a servant of God. With such a leader there were other hermits who lived near or with him, learning the way of discipleship in the desert.

“A certain brother came to Abbot Silvanus at Mount Sinai, and seeing the hermits at work he exclaimed: ‘Why do you work for the bread that perishes? Mary has chosen the best part, namely to sit at the feet of the Lord without working. Then the Abbot said to his disciple Zachary: ‘Give the brother a book and let him read, and put him in an empty cell.’ At the ninth hour the brother who was reading began to look out to see if the Abbot was not going to call him to dinner, and sometime after the ninth hour he himself went to the Abbot and said: ‘Did the brothers not eat today, Father?’ ‘O yes, certainly,’ said the Abbot, ‘they just had dinner.’ ‘Well,’ said the brother, ‘why did you not call me?’ ‘You are a spiritual man,’ said the elder, ‘you don’t need this food that perishes. We have to work, but you have chosen the best part. You

read all day, and can get along without food.’ Hearing this the brother said: ‘Forgive me, Father. And the elder said: ‘Martha is necessary to Mary, for it was because Martha worked that Mary was able to be praised.’” (1)

It’s tough keeping balance in our lives. It’s that conflict within between frenzied work and activity, on the one hand, and quiet reflection—that is, being **“at the feet of Jesus.”** I suggest that in our time we’re prone to becoming consumed with activity—most of it seeming terribly necessary. I can end up like Martha, burdened, **“anxious and worried about many things”**—and because of that, off balance.

Keeping balance—that’s what St. Luke’s Gospel wants us to do. Can we carve out some time each day—maybe starting off just for five minutes? No noise, just letting that mystery about which St. Paul wrote, **“It is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”** **“Christ in us”**—we’ve got to allow that gift take root within us. It might be for our teenagers, reading one chapter from the Bible each night. For me, it’s sitting in a family rocking chair (an heirloom more than seventy-five years old), looking out the window at a magnolia tree. With the Scriptures, it’s my quiet time with the Lord. For all of us—we do it in our own way. By grace, may we do it consistently. By grace, may we keep balance.

(1) The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century, translated by Thomas Merton (New York City: A New Directions Book, 1960), pp. 36-37. See also pp. 14-15. I am grateful to parishioner Tom Kirchberg for pointing out this passage to me.

