

- Once again, the *'Mary and Martha Gospel'* comes up! When this happens, I like to say the same thing ~ that *I'm lucky to be married to a Martha*. For Martha's are *special*, and in *many* ways. But every time this Gospel comparison between the two sisters comes up, we who are married to (or who are friends with) women named Martha have *our annual challenge*. How do we console them? How do we explain *why this reading does not really mean what it sounds like*? That is, that *'Mary's who are busy praying' are more noble than 'Martha's who are busy serving.'* But, it's not really so hard ~ we just have to be sensitive to what Luke actually tells us.
- The traditional understanding of our Gospel *mis-hears* it. For we should remember at least *two things* about this story ~ that *Martha is mentioned first, before Mary; and, that Martha offers hospitality to the Lord*. Therefore, and most appropriately, *the Church has a feast day for Mary and Martha, commemorating them together* with their brother Lazarus. This tells us something important - that *serving and prayer are not an either/or. Both Mary and Martha surely served*. And we know that Martha's words of faith – *spoken to Jesus when her brother Lazarus died*– reveal *a deep and prayerful spiritual perception*. This insight is reflected in the painting of the two sisters by the Chinese-American painter, He Qi. Notice how *the artist portrays both sisters reverently inclining their heads toward Jesus*.
- This *both-and* perception of the relation between work and prayer is not unique to Mary and Martha. St Benedict's Rule, and the Benedictine tradition in Anglicanism, teach us that *prayer is holy work, and that work can be a form of prayer*. Benedict tells us that the tools in the garden shed are to be treated *with the same respect* as the communion chalices in the sacristy. For *both* are made for holy work. This is significant because of our culture's tendency to see *things in parts* rather than *as whole*. *Perceiving how Martha and Mary's roles intertwine and complement one another is to see how they are part of the wholeness of their family with Lazarus*. Discerning how a

monk does holy work when he is praying with his brothers in church, helps us also see how he can *also* be praying when he does his holy work in the monastery kitchen or garden.

- Another example of how we sometimes accept a separation between related aspects of the bible, happens with Paul's letters. Some scholars say that a few of Paul's letters, like Ephesians and Colossians, *may* have been written by a follower of Paul. It's *possible*, and we won't know the answer until we get to '*the other side*,' and can ask Paul himself! But *this tendency to focus-on-the-parts-at-the-expense-of-the-whole* may be at work here. *Why not grant that, as people get older, they mature, and often see things more expansively*, and in a more encompassing way? *Why not grant that, over the years, Paul centered himself increasingly on 'the big picture'?*
- This question helps us with our Epistle reading today, from Colossians.<sup>1</sup> Since the time I was preparing for Baptism as an adult convert, *Colossians 1* has been one of my favorite texts ~ especially because of its *cosmic vision of Christ*, and his significance for our lives. It's one of several New Testament texts that speak directly about *Christ's pre-existence*, and of *his eternity*.<sup>2</sup> With its encompassing view of God's involvement with the world, in and through Jesus, this is a *profound passage with which to shape your prayers*. Paul's words here embody his '*catholic*' view of Christ. And by '*catholic*,' I don't mean an *institution* or a *denomination*. I use the word the way it's used in the Apostles' Creed, to refer to "*the whole truth about the whole God for the whole world*."<sup>3</sup>
- *The whole truth about the whole God for the whole world* centers on three things: God's creation of, God's presence in, as well as God's purposes for, *the whole world in Christ*. Coming to see the world *as God sees it*, is coming to see the world *whole* or in *a holy way*. Just look at Paul's repeated use of the words *all things* in this passage! *In Christ Jesus*, "*all things* in heaven and

on earth *were created*." Christ "is *before all things*, and in him *all things hold together*." Not only that, *in Christ* "all the fullness of God was pleased to *dwell*, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven..."

- The *mystery of the Gospel*, according to Paul, is that "Christ Jesus is the *icon or image of the invisible God*," and that he is now *in us*, becoming *in and for us the hope of glory*. Paul tells us that *the purpose of discipleship, the purpose of the ministry we all share in Baptism, is completeness or wholeness in Christ*. We proclaim Christ Jesus, he says, "teaching everyone with *all wisdom*, that we may present *everyone mature in Christ*."<sup>4</sup> The Greek word here is the same word that the King James Bible translates as "*perfect*" in Matthew 5:48: "be ye *perfect*, even as your heavenly Father is perfect!" ~ Meaning, *be complete and whole and holy*, just as God your Father is complete, whole, and holy. And when this happens, *it is not our work but God's presence within us*, in Christ Jesus. Through him, we become *complete, whole and holy*. This happens when the source of all completeness, wholeness and holiness, comes to inhabit every aspect of our being, every corner of our consciousness, and every shadow within our memories. For, as Paul says in the next chapter, *in Christ Jesus "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him."*<sup>5</sup>
- **This profound vision is the horizon for our discipleship**, especially as we come to live together as a community of disciples. Discipleship involves our *being* and our *doing*. Now, in the moral life, we know that *doing shapes being*. *What we do* shapes *who we are* and who we become, just as *who we are is then reflected in our doing*. Too often, we assume this is *practically* true in our spiritual growth - as if, by pursuing certain *techniques, practices or disciplines*, we can shape our own spiritual progress. Yet, **it is Christ Jesus who shapes our being**. He re-shapes our being from its *bent* shape to its God-intended *mature, whole, and complete shape*. As Paul helps us see in

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Colossians, when the fullness of God in Christ Jesus comes to inhabit our hearts and minds, and souls and bodies, the fullness of God in Christ Jesus inhabits our *doing*, as well. This is true for us *as individuals*, and it is true for us *as a community*.

- And so we come full circle, back to the community within that house at Bethany, where Jesus loved to go for refreshment. Nurtured by his presence with them, *Mary and Martha came to exemplify the unity of being and doing* – and especially *how changed being leads to changed doing*. Centering ourselves on our new life in Christ Jesus, we become icons of his transforming presence. *Through us –through what we do, but even more through how our being is changed by him– people see more and more of God.*



*He Qi, Mary and Martha*

**Luke 10:38-42**

As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. *She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks;* so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part,* which will not be taken away from her."

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Colossians 1:15-28, in context.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, several passages in John's Gospel, as well as Romans 1, Philippians 2, and Revelations 22

<sup>3</sup> A fine definition of 'catholic theology' offered by Ralph McMichael.

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 1:28.

<sup>5</sup> Colossians 2:9-10.