

If there were a top 10 list of scripture passages Episcopalians love to hate, today's gospel lesson would be at the top of the list. We like to think Martha is treated unfairly by Jesus. What do you mean Mary is doing the better part?

Martha is busy preparing a meal for her Lord and Savior. Meanwhile, Mary is just sitting the living room seemingly doing nothing constructive. In Martha's mind, Mary has her feet propped up on the sofa watching the football game and eating chips.

One reason we Episcopalians have a hard time with this passage is because we are often more comfortable expressing our faith through actions rather than words. Our unofficial motto is a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words."

While this is a great motto in a world where talk is cheap, it can sometimes blind us to the power of God's Word. It can make us think we have to do all the work when, in fact, God's Word is what truly brings healing to a broken world.

The good news for us Episcopalians is that Jesus isn't ranking which form of devotion is better. Both listening to God's Word and serving God's people are good things. Both are essential to our life of faith. Rather, Jesus is saying the better part is staying focused on the task at hand.

The problem surfaces when Martha complains to Jesus that Mary isn't helping her in the kitchen. Martha is cooking up a storm and could use a little help from her sister. Instead of asking Mary for help, she triangulates Jesus and says, "Can you please tell my sister to help me?"

Jesus, however, will not be triangulated. Instead, he offers Martha a piece of spiritual advice. He tells Martha that she is worried and distracted by many things. Mary is doing the better part. He also says that there is need of only one thing. And the one thing isn't necessarily sitting at the feet of Jesus.

The one thing is giving Jesus our undivided attention no matter how we find ourselves living out our faith. One of our post communion prayers invites us to serve God with "gladness and singleness of heart." Whether we are serving at the soup kitchen, attending Bible study, volunteering for VBS, running a business meeting, playing with a friend, or putting the kids to bed Jesus is asking for our undivided attention.

In a world where we are constantly bombarded by words and images, it is hard to give anyone our undivided attention – let alone Jesus. We live in a world where multi-tasking is a virtue. Not only are we supposed to do all the things, but we are also supposed to do them flawlessly. Instead, we end up failing across the board. No wonder we are exhausted.

Jesus gives us some good news. He says, "there is need of only one thing." And that one thing is me, and I will order the rest of your lives. I will turn your failures into opportunities to learn and grow. I will give you the life you can't seem to find for yourself. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be given unto you.

The cultural environment that most of us live in today is conditioning us to think that church or devotion to Jesus is just one of many things on a long list of things. Instead of being at the top of the list, Jesus is alongside laundry or baseball or college football. Like Martha, we are worried and distracted by many things. Our attention is divided.

This worry and distraction not only prevent us from having a full and robust relationship with Jesus, but it also prevents us from looking inward at our own spiritual world. While we are busy asking Jesus to get those people to do what we want them to do, we neglect to pay attention to what Jesus is inviting us to do. This so often deprives us from knowing that peace that passes all understanding.

If we spend our time judging others for the way in which they choose to live out their faith, what time do we have to focus on our own relationship with Jesus? We are simply distracting ourselves from the work we need to be doing for our own spiritual health when we spend all our energy judging how another practices their faith.

In a few minutes you'll hear from Mary Beth Basu who will share one way the Episcopal Church in Alabama invites her people to sit at the feet of Jesus. She will tell you about a retreat weekend at Camp McDowell that strives to free you from the worries and distractions of this life so you can focus on the one thing – a relationship with Christ.

The retreat weekend is called Cursillo. And really it is more than a retreat weekend. It is a Spirit-led movement that helps the faithful stay focused on Jesus amid the cares and occupations of this life. The movement makes space for small groups to meet on a regular basis as a way of keeping Jesus at the center of their lives through prayer or piety, study or devotion, and service or action.

There are plenty of other ways to keep Jesus the main thing. This week we are hosting a special dinner and informational session for those interested learning more about Education for Ministry (EfM). This four-year program developed by the School of Theology at Sewanee helps equip lay leaders for the work of ministry.

While each year focuses on a different aspect of the Christian faith, all participants are invited to engage in theological reflection. The idea of theological reflection is to see God in all things – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Theological reflection is a way of practicing our faith, of learning how to keep God at the center in a world full of distractions and worries.

Cursillo and EfM are just two of many tools that are meant to help us keep Jesus the main thing. Like any other tool, we humans have the tendency to worship the tool rather than what the tool is pointing to. If the tool becomes more important than the object of our faith, we've turned the tool into an idol or substitute god.

Martha essentially turns her service to Jesus into an idol. The meal she prepares grows to be more important than service to her house guest. The meal instead of Jesus becomes the object of her faith. It's not that preparing the meal is bad. Rather, it is that the meal blinds her to what is the most important thing which is a relationship with Jesus.

Jesus isn't asking her to stop working in the kitchen. Rather, he is inviting her to remember the *why* of her service. She is working hard in the kitchen because she loves Jesus, and her love of Jesus is revealed through service and hospitality. The minute she judges her sister for not helping she misses the point. Even though she believes she is trying her hardest to do the right thing, she fails to love both Jesus and her sister.

While our life of faith cannot be lived out to its fullest without Christian community, we must also not neglect to see that we are all on our own journey, we are all in different places on our spiritual path. Instead of judging each other for where we are on that path,

what if we encouraged each other and trusted that God is working on all of us in God's own way and time?

In a few minutes, we will promise to support Sloane and Ella on their spiritual journey own spiritual journeys. And while we are called to do all in our power to support Sloane, Ella, and all our children in their life in Christ, we must ultimately trust that only the power of God's Word can truly save them and give them life. And that is where the life of faith rests – in the power of God's Word.

We live in a world where talk is cheap, but that just makes encountering God's Word even more essential. Encountering God's Word has the power to let the worries and distractions of this life take their proper place which is in the hands of a God who can free even the things that worry us the most – allowing us to truly love God and our neighbor. Amen.