

The Story

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The spiritual writer Fr. Richard Rohr speaks of three levels of meaning. Each level is valuable. Each level also has its limitations. The goal is to have and integrate all three levels in order to become who God created us to be.

The first level of meaning is what he calls 'My Story.' This is the story of each of us as individuals. It has been underdeveloped for much of human history, but that is changing. People are finally able and at times even encouraged to share their personal stories about who they are. 'My story' includes how I see things, my opinions, my rights, my feelings, and my identity. For as necessary as this level is, if it is all we have, however, we are going to be way too fragile. That is why we need other levels of meaning.

The second level of meaning is what he calls 'Our Story.' This is the story of who we are as a community. Our community can be based on social networks such as our family, our friend group, our country, our parish, or our ethnic group. Most cultures in human history have lived at this level of meaning as a matter of survival. By working together, they defended themselves from the enemy

and supported those who were like them. This level is making a strong comeback in our American society today. If this level is all we have, however, we will overlook the important stories of individuals within the community and also be raised with all the negative assumptions and blind spots of the group.

The third level of meaning is what he calls 'The Story.' This is the story which transcends my story and our story. It is the story that began prior to the book of Genesis and the story that will continue after the book of Revelation. In this story, what is true is always true, what is one is always one, what is good is always good, and what is beautiful is always beautiful. This level of the story is God's story.

In today's Gospel passage, we read about two contrasting women: Martha and Mary. While we are likely quite sympathetic to Martha, Jesus concluded this passage by saying, "Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her." How can apparently doing nothing be better than welcoming and serving others?

Looking at Fr. Rohr's three levels of meaning, we could say that Mary chose the better part because whereas the first and second levels of 'my story' and 'our story,' as represented by Martha, can be found through our own efforts, 'the story' can only be found by sitting at the feet of Jesus listening. It is something we

have to receive. Mary is not doing nothing. She is taking in the story beyond the self-doubt that dominated her own story and the story of gender discrimination practiced by her community's story (only men could sit at the feet of a teacher). She is hearing the foundational story of a God of love that assures her that everything is going to be OK.

The deepest level of meaning in our lives comes through listening for the story beyond my story and our story.

Do I usually live at the level of meaning centered on 'My Story' or 'Our Story'? At what moments in my life have I heard parts of 'The Story?'

As we continue with this mass, let us pray for an appreciation and integration of all three levels of meaning- 'my story,' 'our story,' and 'the story.' We will know we have not reached 'the story' when, like Martha, we complain about other people and are anxious about many things. We will know we have reached 'the story,' the deepest level of meaning, when we can just sit and listen.