

11C 2025

The key to the famous story of Mary and Martha is that Jesus says to Mary that she has chosen the *better* part.

It is not black and white, in other words.

It is not that Martha is evil and Mary is a saint.

Mary has chosen the *better* part.

There is a hierarchy of values, and Mary has ordered her values better.

Luke tells us that “Martha,” on the other hand, “was distracted by her many tasks.”

Her top value was getting things done.

Mary’s was the gospel.

Martha puts cleanliness before Godliness, in other words, whereas Mary puts God first.

She does not hold other things as worthless, but they come second or third for her.

I worked hard, too hard, really, to develop a good relationship with my neighbor across the street who is very different from me.

He and I have different values.

He sees the world quite fearfully, has a different aesthetic, different politics, different religious views (mostly, I have them and he does not), but he also would come over and steady a ladder or insist on loaning me tools when he saw that I was engaged in a project, or offer me a ride to pick up my car at the mechanic.

I wanted to build on that, to reciprocate, and to be a good neighbor.

It seemed to be working well, but then took a sudden turn when, one windy day some leaves under my loquat tree blew across the street onto his lawn.

This is the lawn that he had rolled out after he moved in, the lawn that he has at times literally vacuumed, the lawn in which he wants to find zero insects of any kind.

He treats his lawn like his living room carpet, in other words, and he was furious that some of “my” leaves had blown across the street onto his property.

Loquat leaves decay very slowly.

They therefore make a great mulch for that section of of my yard, which is enclosed within a broad, short wall.

Very little grows through those leaves.

He texted that he wanted me to remove not only all the leaves from his lawn, but also all the leaves under my tree.

I explained that they were useful to me and I wanted them left there.

The next time he saw me in the yard, he came over and confronted me using a word I would not repeat in the pulpit.

It became clear to me that, in his hierarchy of values, his lawn was more important than our relationship.

Similarly, many people have told me that, when their partner died, their supposed friends all deserted them.

I suspect that, in most cases, this was because those who they thought were their friends were, like most Americans, pleasure seekers.

They place pleasure, in other words, at the top of their values, and do not want to be around a downer who reminds them that their fantasy of sipping margaritas together under palm trees will come to an end one day when they, too, lose a partner.

Besides, being present to a person in grief really harshes one's high.

They do not say it this way.

They are probably not fully cognizant of their own values.

At some deep level, they may have an awareness that there is something wrong with abandoning a friend, so they make excuses.

They attempt to rationalize away those pangs of conscience.

“Well, we need two for bridge.

“Now he is only one.

“It just will not work.”

Few will acknowledge to themselves, “Grief is a major downer. I am going to run in the other direction because I prefer pleasure over all things.”

And please hear this part well.

Do not be angry at yourself for being fooled.

We really do not know what another person's values are until they are tested.

They might say they love God and their neighbor with all their heart, but wait until you ask them to help you move.

Talk is cheap, as we say, and it is easy to be someone's friend when everything is going well.

Be gentle with yourself when you are fooled.

It happens to all of us.

Not everyone values *pleasure* the most, of course.

Some people value money, some ego, some power, some escape or numbness.

These things are not to be despised in the proper setting.

I, for one, want to be numb when I am having dental work.

We also do not valorize poverty or suffering in the Episcopal Church; we simply do not put money and pleasure first.

God and relationships come first for us.

Pleasure and money are important, but they are second or third.

It is difficult to find people who truly put God and neighbor first, which are two aspects of the same thing, since, as Paul tells us, all things, everything—space, time, matter, souls—came into being through Christ.

Some people will claim that they put God first and that justifies hateful treatment of others.

I have told you before, there are even churches who will tell you whom to hate.

Their god is not God, who is love, the source, the creator, the center of peace, compassion, and wisdom.

In fact, God is just a projection of their own egos.

We can call anything “God,” in other words, and *pretend* that it is the God of Abraham, Jesus, and Francis.

People will create their own list of evils according to their values (for some, loquat leaves are Satan), but the real evil, according to the God in whom all are united as one, is anything that causes division.

Keep that in mind for identifying evil.

Many people think that having different opinions causes division.

That is incorrect.

We all have some differing opinions.

The only person who does not is the person in the mirror, some days.

It is how we react to that difference that causes division.

Matthew worked for the Romans as a tax collector, or a revenuer, as they used to say,
and Simon wanted to overturn Roman rule.

They had a difference of opinion, but they worked together to spread the gospel.

If we fear difference, if we despise difference, then, *then* we cause division.

If we put relationship as our highest priority, on the other hand—love of God and
neighbor—we will want to understand others and let them, even help them, to
continue their paths of learning, just as we would want others to do for us.

No one wants to be verbally assaulted, hated, manipulated, scapegoated.

Occasionally, it is given to us to suggest to a person that there is something more
valuable than the thing that person is worshipping, but often, such statements are
pointless.

In all cases, however, we must seek to understand ourselves and others while not
allowing others to abuse us.

That does not honor God.

People are at varying stages on their journeys, as must be.

Just be aware, seek to put God first, and, when you trust someone who betrays you, be
gentle with yourself.

Life on this plane teaches us what is truly important and what is not, if we let it, if we keep our eyes open and always seek to understand.

We are best when we choose the better part, when we carefully arrange our hierarchy of values such that God is at the top.