

Today's gospel is short and quick.

It is familiar to us. Two sisters, Martha and Mary, welcome Jesus into their home. These two women are the sisters of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead.

Martha, who is traditionally the older sister, fusses about protocol and hospitality, making sure the glasses stay full and the food stays hot. The other sister, Mary just sits and listens in the presence of Jesus, seemingly ignoring the service she was expected to give.

I understand Martha.

In Martha we see ourselves -- worried and distracted by all we have to do in the world and forgetting to spend time with Jesus. It is, however, comforting to note that Jesus loved her just the same.

After all, Jesus Himself said that He came not to be served but to serve. He warns us in the Gospel of Matthew that failure to serve others, the poor, the sick, the thirsty, the naked; the prisoner, is to run the risk of being denied at the pearly gates.

Service to God and to others is not just the right thing to do, it is a mandate. It is not an option.

Jesus gave us two Sacraments, marriage and holy orders, which are Sacraments of Service.

Spouses in service to one another, Bishop, Priest and Deacon as servants of the people of God.

In fact, the word deacon literally means "servant". Since we are all, by our Christian nature to be servants, we are all, literally, by definition of the word, deacons.

Once again, here we identify with being like Martha.

Perhaps that is why Jesus' words in today's Gospel seem personal and particular to us:

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”

The challenge before us is not so much to understand Martha, but to understand why Mary’s choice was better.

The answer for me came shortly after ordination. Maybe it will be helpful to share the story.

During my four years of formation, the strongest emphasis was always put on service. I was taught that service was central, that it was the core of the deacon. Everything was seen and done through the eyes of a servant.

About two weeks after ordination, a priest at my parish took it upon himself to teach me how to serve at the altar. This was needed because the men in our class were not given a lot of direction in this aspect of ministry.

After a few hours of my fumbling around with chalices and altar linens and such, this priest asked me how I saw my service at the altar. I told him that since everything flowed from service, my presence at the altar was a public expression of that service to others. I said that if I had not done some sort of good service outside of Mass, I would have no business serving at the Mass.

It made perfect sense to me.

His answer to this about knocked me over. He said I had it exactly wrong. That if I did not serve at Mass, I had no business serving outside of Mass.

Because of his candor, I began, over the years, to unwrap my own understanding of ministry from this perspective.

What I have come to understand is that it was not a question for myself, or for any Christian as to whether it is better to be a Martha or a Mary. What matters is how to be a Martha AND a Mary.

Without that balance, service is just business. It is in our prayer, our time in Scripture, our participation in Mass, we sit at the feet of Jesus and we are conformed more closely to the mind and heart of Christ. It is from there that we go out to serve. It is from there that our service takes on meaning. It is from there that our own diaconates become holy actions.

It also changes our understanding and even purpose of service. We come to know that whatever we do, when it flows from our spiritual lives is service to God.

When done for the benefit of another through the Love of God and in the love of God changing a diaper or punching the clock or bathing a leper become service on pretty much equal footing.

It is worth noting that Martha and Mary appear together in two more visits that Jesus makes to see them.

The next visit shows how well Martha learned the lesson of today's Gospel. She is grieving the death of her brother with a house full of mourners when she hears that Jesus has just come to the area. This time she summons her sister Mary to come to Jesus.

Martha's conversation with Jesus shows her faith and courage. In this dialogue she states clearly without doubt that she believes in Jesus' power, in the resurrection, and most of all that Jesus is the Son of God.

Our final picture of both Martha and Mary together in Scripture is the one that sums up who they had become to be.

Jesus has returned to Bethany some time later to share a meal with his good friends. In this home were three extraordinary people. We hear how brother Lazarus caused a stir after he was brought back to life. We hear how Mary causes a commotion at dinner by anointing Jesus with expensive perfume. But all we hear about Martha is the simple statement: "Martha served." She isn't in the spotlight, she doesn't do big things, and she doesn't receive spectacular miracles. She simply serves Jesus.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the most important thing that could be said about us is "They served"?