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## Choose the better part

--Katherine20250720--

Today's scripture may sound familiar to many Christians. We probably all know that Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus were very close friends of Jesus.

In Today's Gospel, Jesus came to their home in Bethany. Martha was busy preparing meals, while Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to His sermon. Martha was unhappy about it and complained to Jesus. So, Jesus replied to her gently, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but you need only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Someone might ask: Does Jesus want us to serve Him like Martha, or does he want us to put down our work and listen to the sermon attentively like Mary? In fact, Jesus did not ask us to choose between serving and listening to him. He is reminding us to "understand why we serve" and "always remember why we serve."

When Jesus talked to Martha, he emphasized that she was too focused on what she was doing and forgot the purpose of her service. Jesus did not deny Martha's service or belittle her hard work, but pointed out that in all her busyness, she must not forget that there is a more important and indispensable thing.

Jesus said she needed only one thing. What is this thing? Jesus did not say it clearly. But, we can see from the context that Jesus was talking about the matter of "leading people to God", just like the words of Paul in Colossians we read earlier today.

We can understand Martha's frustration. It was not easy to do so many tasks by herself to welcome Jesus and his disciples. But, it was not that simple. The scripture says: "she was worried and distracted by many things". It means Martha's heart or thoughts had been led in another direction. The issue that the Gospel wants to point out is not Martha's work, but her heart and mind.

Martha tried hard to be a good host, but when she came to Jesus to complain, Jesus saw Martha's heart was completely led to entertaining guests, and she forgot that there was something more important than what she was doing, that is, "loving God, getting close to God, and leading people to God".

Jesus pointed out Martha thought about loving people, but forgot to love God; she did many things to welcome people, but forgot to get close to God; she focused on serving people, but forgot to lead people to God.

Ideally, the part of "loving people, welcoming people, serving people" and the part of "loving God, getting close to God, and leading people to God" should be unified as one. But in our real life, it is not easy to keep the balance between these two parts. How to keep a good balance of these two parts is something we Christians should strive for throughout our lives, and it is also a sign of our Christian maturity.

Since the early church, some Christians have attached great importance to being close to God, such as the Desert Fathers. They felt that people in the city were restless and too focused on worldly things, which prevented them from calming down and focusing on God and being close to God. Therefore, they lived in the desert, where they meditated and prayed all day long. Although life in the desert was hard, they were willing to endure the hard life in order to be close to God.

At that time, many people would go to the desert to see the Desert Fathers and seek spiritual guidance and care from them. These desert fathers had a profound influence on later

Christianity, especially in terms of spiritual life. Later, monasteries and many churches inherited the traditions of these saints.

At the same time as these desert fathers, there were many bishops and priests who insisted on pastoring the church in the city, preaching the gospel to people, and helping those in need. Especially when the church was persecuted, they bravely paid the price of their lives and died for the Lord Christ.

Later, when Christianity became the state religion, the church became more involved in the affairs of the real world. They emphasized that the church should be the light and salt, glorify God and benefit people on earth, and realize the kingdom of God. This formed the traditions of state religions such as Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, and Anglicanism, which later had a huge impact in the world.

As Christians and the Church, our ideal state is of course to emphasize being close to God and pursuing “Christ dwell in us and we dwell in Christ” in worship and personal spiritual life, while also attaching importance to “pursuing to be the light and salt, serving everyone, and helping those in need”. This is not an easy thing to do, but it is our lifelong pursuit and mission as Christians and the Church. In this regard, Mother Teresa has set a good example for us.

Mother Teresa became a nun at the age of 18. During a train journey, she experienced God's calling to her which was “to serve the poorest and most forgotten people”. She quickly answered the call, left her monastery, walked into the slums on the streets of Kolkata, India, and began her work among the poor, the sick, and the dying.

When Mother Teresa first started her ministry, she had no funds or organizational support. She had to only rely on her faith and unstopping prayer. She got up at four in the morning to pray, meditate on Jesus' words, and draw strength from the Lord's feet. Then she walked into the stinking streets, picked up the sick and dying people, cleaned their wounds with her bare hands, and accompanied them through the last days of their lives.

Her private letters published later revealed that Mother Teresa often experienced spiritual droughts, struggles in her heart, and the pain of not being seen. But she did not give up her service for God's kingdom. She insisted on praying every day and worshiping the Lord. She wrote: “Even though I can't feel God, I still know He is there, and I choose to love Him.”

Mother Teresa listened to God's voice throughout her life, turned her love for God into action, and did everything she could to love all those who God led to her, and led more people to the God at the same time.

We all know how hard it is to show kindness to those who are different from us and to those who have no relationship with us. We also know that it is not difficult for a person to do good things or to help others occasionally, but it is difficult to do so for a long time. However, Jesus commended us to “love God with all our heart, soul, and mind” and “love our neighbor as ourselves”.

When we received the holy baptism, we also solemnly made our vows to God that “*we will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; We will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; and we will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of everyone with God's help.*”

The Bible teaches us to “*preach the word, be prepared in season and out of season, correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction.*”

So, whether in good times or bad times, we should always practice the love in Christ given by God and lead them to God. We should constantly seek and serve Christ in all kinds of people, show mercy, practice justice, speak up for the disadvantaged and marginalized, and fight

for their fairness and freedom. This is crucial for us who are living in today's complex, chaotic, divided and even hostile environment.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated the Independence Day of the United States. We excitedly watched the dazzling fireworks in the sky, we put our hands on our chests and sang the national anthem "The Star-Spangled Banner", and we commemorated and celebrated the efforts and advocacy of independence and freedom by American forefathers since the founding of the country.

At the same time, we also clearly see the unrest, turmoil, fear, harm, hostility and unfair treatment that the communities we live in and the people we care about are experiencing every day. We must face our reality with honesty, that is, to preach the gospel with a clear purpose and firm faith at this time and place, we need to be more loving, with more wisdom, and with more courage.

The Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe made a powerful address on the Independence Day. I'd like to share some of his message with you:

*".....Churches like ours, protected by the First Amendment and practiced in galvanizing people of goodwill, may be some of the last institutions capable of resisting this administration's overreach and recklessness. To do so faithfully, we must see beyond the limitations of our tradition and respond not in partisan terms, but as Christians who seek to practice our faith fully in a free and fair democracy....."*

*We did not seek this predicament, but God calls us to place the most vulnerable and marginalized at the center of our common life, and we must follow that command regardless of the dictates of any political party or earthly power. We are now being faced with a series of choices between the demands of the federal government and the teachings of Jesus, and that is no choice at all.*

*This is not the same kind of patriotism that has guided our church since its founding in 1785, but this July Fourth, it may be the most faithful service we can render — both to the country we love and the God we serve."*

Martha and Mary faced the challenge of how to balance serving the Lord and listening to the Lord in their times. Mother Teresa faced the challenge of how to respond to God's call with her faith and love, to go into the brokenness of the world and become a vessel of God's love in her times. The challenge we face in our times is how to practice our love for God and our love for our neighbor in the world of division and strife.

May we all keep in mind not to let our heart and thoughts be led away from God. May we always remember the better part and the only one thing we need which is leading people to God. May we strive to proclaim Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. Amen.