

Genesis 18:1-10a
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

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We're all so very human ... and we try to figure out how to respond to relationships and changing circumstances. Our roles vary as different needs emerge, causing us to step forward or step back. Most of us want to be appropriate, to be good stewards toward an optimal outcome. It's frustrating and embarrassing when it backfires, or we feel misunderstood, perhaps judged. I keep reminding myself the necessity of humility and humor, whether it's about myself and other people.

I laughed to read a story which took place in a small New England village, a place where the actor Paul Newman was fond of vacationing. A Michigan woman and her family were visiting this seaside community. Late one Saturday morning, she felt a craving for a double-dip chocolate ice-cream cone, so she stopped by the local café and general store. There was only one other customer in the place: a man in jeans and a T-shirt, sitting at the counter having a donut and coffee. The woman glanced his way and did a double-take in recognizing the handsome actor. Newman noticed her presence and nodded graciously in her direction. Then he went back to his coffee.

"He just wants his privacy," the woman thought to herself. "Just order the ice cream. Pretend there isn't a famous movie star sitting a few feet away." This is exactly what she did (although she later admitted her heart was thumping and her hands felt clammy). Calmly, she watched the clerk scoop out her ice cream and pack it into the cone, never looking once in Newman's direction. Then she handed over the money, accepted the ice-cream cone and change, and headed out the door without a sideward glance. As the screen door slammed shut, she congratulated herself on how coolly she'd handled the whole situation — like a real Hollywood insider.

When the woman reached her car, she realized something wasn't right. Something was missing. In one hand she held her change, but her other hand was empty. "Now where's my ice-cream cone?" she asked herself. "Could I have left it in the store?" Sheepishly, she went back in, hoping she'd see the cone still in the clerk's hand or maybe in one of those holders on the counter. But no. She looked to the left, then the right. No sign of the missing cone. She was just about to ask the clerk where it was, when she glanced over in Paul Newman's direction. Those blue eyes were sparkling with amusement. Flashing his trademark, pearly-white grin, he said, "You put it in your purse!" Now *there's* a woman who was distracted!

So was Martha, in today's gospel lesson — but for a different reason. Luke tells us she was "distracted by her many tasks." Her mission was to host a dinner party, honoring Jesus and His followers. She is following the time-honored Middle-Eastern ritual of hospitality. It seemed a huge responsibility, and she was determined to do it well. Good things can be stressful as crises. Martha sees something which stops her dead in her tracks. Her sister Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, hanging on his every word. It didn't seem very responsible, and Martha was rather annoyed. In exasperation, she found herself venting to Jesus: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

I'm guessing she immediately regretted her outburst, realizing she just broke one of the paramount laws of hospitality anywhere, anytime: "Never let them see you sweat." The room was filled with an awkward silence. Could this host hear the gracious response of Jesus' words: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Or would Martha feel she was judged, resenting Mary even more?

We all know what it's like to lose perspective, to get distracted by overwhelming details which causes us to lose our focus on what's most important in any given moment. How many times have you set out to do the right thing, only to toss and turn through the night, feeling exhausted by morning and worried about all the things which could go wrong? It's as if we've set ourselves up for failure, clutching resentments instead of a repentant attitude of joy and hope. Brooding becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby you blame other people for your misery.

What Jesus is trying to teach Martha is a perspective of attentiveness, of living fully in the present. Details can make a big difference creating a shared experience of honoring events and relationships. But every one of us is capable of becoming our own worst enemy, and when we refuse to recognize this, everybody suffers. We try to do the right thing, but wind up doing it poorly, somehow distracted by less important concerns.

When an athlete is competing, should he or she focus on the competition? Isn't this distracting? Should the focus be on the prize itself ... or could this also prove to be a distraction? What if we simply strive to do our personal best? If it's a matter of teamwork, of course we notice the shortcomings of others, and yet will teamwork improve if we develop a bad attitude toward relationships?

I can identify with Martha's dilemma, and it makes me laugh to think of her plopping down beside her sister and letting the dinner burn. Perhaps Mary could have been a bit more attentive to her sister's needs, and yet Jesus does point out how she too is demonstrating hospitality. We're all so very human, so prone to distraction, worry, and unfortunately, resentment. It takes great discipline, humility and humor to be good stewards of our relationships, in addition to the needs of our circumstances. I don't think Jesus is saying Martha's concerns are unimportant, but is saying there is a balancing perspective in the bigger picture of things.

Jesus commends Mary for her attentiveness to relationships, even if she was distracted from helpful chores of the moment. As for Martha, Christ points her away from her stress, worry and resentments, to allow the host to reflect on what she hopes to demonstrate through her hospitality.

Ultimately, isn't this what is needed in our own lives ... our own families ... and our own communities of faith? People are fed in many ways ... especially when our focus stays on being good stewards in demonstrating hospitality in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.