

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time, C

“There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

There have been times when I made a choice, and I knew deep within it was the only choice to be made. It was absolutely the right choice. If I could do it all again, I would make the same choice and do so with thanksgiving and gratitude. There have also been times when I made what I thought was the right choice, but I can now see that a better choice could have been made. I would do things differently if I had the chance to choose again. I suspect most of us could say the same thing.

Too often, we compare the choices we make and their subsequent approval or rejection with our goodness, worthiness, acceptability, faithfulness, and loveliness. That is what most of history has done with Mary and Martha. Mary made the better choice, Jesus says, and we quickly conclude that we should be like Mary, not Martha. We are to sit and listen rather than be active and busy. Mary is often compared to the contemplative life, and Martha to the active life; much of Christian history has viewed the contemplative life as the more perfect one. That is one reading of this text, but is it the only reading, the definitive reading? Is Mary necessarily better, more holy, more loved, more acceptable to Jesus? If Jesus is saying that Mary, to the exclusion of Martha, is the way we are to be, then the next time somebody asks you or me to run some errands or

help with the house cleaning, we should say, **“No, you go ahead. I am going to choose the better part and sit here with Jesus.”** I don’t think that is what Jesus is saying. Jesus is making an observation, not a judgment.

I don’t think this text is really even about Mary and Martha, but about us and the choices we make. That does not mean we are to copycat Mary. If Jesus wanted us to do that, why didn’t he tell us clearly what that “one thing” is? He could have at least given us the five easy steps to choosing the better part, but he didn’t.

Jesus is saying that choices matter. We are always making choices. How many choices do we make each day? Sometimes we choose unconsciously, sometimes quickly and easily, and other times with great deliberation and struggle. Some choices are insignificant. They are forgotten the next day. Other decisions have significant meaning and lasting consequences. Our choices can shape who we are. They can establish in us patterns and habits of how we see and act, the words we speak, and the ways we relate to each other. Our choices can set a trajectory for our lives. Our choices make a difference.

In this particular context, Mary made the better choice, but it was a choice for that time, place, and circumstances. Change the setting, and Martha’s choice might have been the better part. We can see that in Jesus’ own life. Sometimes Jesus went off by himself to be alone, silent, still, to pray, to sit and listen, to be present to his Father. At those times, he was

like Mary. At other times, Jesus was active, on the move, among people, and busy teaching, healing, and feeding 5,000. On those days, he was more like Martha.

While we might distinguish between Mary and Martha, there is a common theme: the importance of presence. Mary and Martha are two ways of being present. Both ways are necessary, faithful, and holy. There is not one choice that is to be made forever and always. We are always to be discerning of the one thing needed in this time, this place, these circumstances. What is the better part given our particular situation? How do we be present, show up, to the divine presence that is already and always before us? That is the question. Some days, Mary will be our guide, and other days, Martha will be our guide. Either way, we must choose.

On some days, that choice may mean sitting quietly and listening to the heartbeat of God within us, reading and studying, watching a sunset with your spouse, or praying for the world. On other days, it may mean speaking words of hope and encouragement, offering actions of compassion and hospitality, seeking forgiveness and making amends, or simply climbing a tree with your child.

What is the one thing needed right now, at this moment? Not forever or what you think will fix all your problems and let you live happily ever after. Just for now. What is the one thing needed that will keep you awake, aware, open, receptive, and present to Christ? Choose that. That is the

better part, but hold your choice lightly because there will be another choice to be made after that, and another after that one.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We choose our way into life, love, relationships, faith, and even salvation, and the choices matter. **Amen.**