

Once again we are part of the heavyweight *Battle of the Bible*: Mary vs. Martha! Which one is better? Why do we always feel sorry for Martha? Isn't Mary really being a little too self-centered?

Now that's an interesting word—"self-centered". It's pretty self-explanatory—it means we are more focused on ourselves than others.

I'd hypothesize that in life- most of us are self-centered. Think about it. How many times a day do we think about ourselves? We think about what we want for breakfast. We think about what we want to wear today. We obsess about how our hair is not doing what it's supposed to. We grumble that other people are driving terribly and inconveniencing us. We spend too much time thinking about getting enough done each day to be seen as an effective employee.

Even when we do things that *don't seem to be* focused on us – they really are. We visit someone and afterward we hope WE helped them, made them happy. We loan someone money and we hope they appreciate our generosity.

I mean heck, if I'm being utterly and completely honest here—I'm very happy when you get something out of my sermon.

But in most everything we do, we are aware of how it reflects on us.

So let's face it-- when we serve, and fetch and clean up— we are not *just* doing these things to make others comfortable.

There's a part of us that *wants* be seen as a good host or hostess We *want* others will see our dedication—and we want to be praised for it! We want people *to see our selflessness*—ironically. And so did Martha.

So really, maybe it's Martha who is just a little self-centered.

We sympathize with Martha because we are Martha. If this story was really all about how selflessly she served Jesus, she wouldn't have needed Jesus to recognize how much work she was doing.

Martha is—pure and simple—human nature.

We want what we **do** to be seen and appreciated. **We** want to be seen and appreciated.

But in this real life of ours-- how often do we give our full attention to what's going on in our lives? We're so busy finishing the lists of things we have to do, rushing from appointment to appointment-- that we really don't give our full attention to what's right in front of us.

In *Our Town*—a play by Thornton Wilder—we see a young woman, Emily, who has grown up, married, and died young. After she dies she begs to relive just one day in her life. She goes back to her 12th birthday, which she remembers fondly.

She now gets the chance to watch the scene, as well as participate in it. She is struck by all the things she didn't notice when she experienced the day the first time—like how young her parents look. She says she just can't look hard enough.

The scene continues and her mother is at the stove concentrating on getting breakfast for everyone, and converses with Emily as she works, and Emily gets increasingly frustrated as she tries to get her mother to stop working, and turn around and look at her.

Finally she says “Oh, Mama, just look at me *one minute* as though you really saw me...for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. *Let's look at one another.*”

But this is a memory of what was, and her mother continues to do her work, and Emily pays attention to her birthday gifts.

Later, she asks, “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?” And the answer? Humans do **not** realize life every moment as they live it, except for saints and poets, maybe.

We spend a lot of our lives being busy and helping people, but it's hard to focus on something when we're always moving, always doing. How many of us take the time to stop and really SEE the people we are helping, in the moment? How many of us who have lost a loved one would give just about anything to look at the face of that person, to really BE with that person, one more time?

Mary has chosen the better part.

She sits with Jesus and sees ONLY Jesus. She's not thinking of or looking at anyone else. She's not talking while doing something else. How often do we give that kind of attention to anyone?

Interestingly, that's the picture the gospels paint of Jesus—how entirely focused he is on each person he talks to, interacts with. How each person he came in contact with felt they were the only person who mattered in that moment. With Jesus there were no distractions.

When my daughter was a few months old, I remember a day when I was getting ready for my parents to visit. I needed to do laundry, vacuum, wash the dishes. I looked at my baby in my arms and knew I needed to put her in her bed for a nap and get to work. But I remember thinking: Zoe's only going to be my baby for a little while, and this time with her is more important than the washing and the dishes.

That insight probably didn't occur to me as often as it could have, and too many times I chose the dishes and the laundry. We're not always going to be Mary. The world would fall apart quickly without our tendency to be Martha.

But let's not forget to take the time regularly to **be** with each other, and allow ourselves the luxury of time spent really seeing each other, and letting ourselves be completely seen.

It is the better path. The dishes will wait. Amen.