

**Donald G. Brown
St. Mary the Virgin, SF
July 17, 2016
Proper 11 C**

After a two Sunday absence I'm heartened to be back at St. Mary's even though I have to sport this clerical black sling. It's designed to protect, not my arm, but incision in my upper arm behind which hides the bright, shinny new right shoulder joint Dr. Tom Norris of this parish expertly installed on June 27. I have pictures if anyone wants to see them.

One way to summarize today's gospel account involving the interactions of Jesus, Martha and her sister, Mary is to see it as a commentary on the difference between "being or contemplative study" and "doing." Over the days since my surgery, I've had plenty of time to be a contemplative because there was not much I really could do other than lay low and heal as I've been giving thanks for your

prayers and the many get well cards and emails that have come my way these last three weeks.

In this morning's gospel we find a prime example of what the loss of perspective can do to a person. The story, as it comes to us, is short and sweet.

Martha invites Jesus into her home. Her sister Mary listens to Jesus's teaching. Martha can't listen because she is busy attending to the duties of hospitality. Martha feels put upon and complains that Mary is neglecting the duties of hospitality. In frustration and anger, Martha exhorts Jesus to instruct Mary to help her. Jesus responds that Mary has chosen the better activity.

The most obvious conclusion we can draw from this story is that Martha had passed up a golden opportunity to grow spiritually by listening and relating to Jesus.

This account also presents us with an accurate and vivid portrayal of the tension between *being* and *doing*. In theological terms, Martha represents the *vita active*, the active life. Mary represents the *vita contemplative*, the contemplative life. Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen “the better part.” But what we have here is a life lesson that is much more nuanced.

Christianity is not so much about believing in God in an intellectual or philosophical sense as it is about pursuing a relationship with God anchored in the depths of our human emotional and spiritual core. To know God in this way is to immerse ourselves in a life changing relationship..... any deep relationship, whether divine or human, takes time, energy, focus, and openness. None of this is easy.

Jesus told Martha, the busy one, that she, like Mary, needed to choose the "better part, which will not be taken away." In practical terms I think what this

means is taking the time to build a relationship with God, to discover the mind of Christ and the work of God's loving Holy Spirit.

There is an aspect to this encounter between Martha, Mary and Jesus that I find both liberating and frightening. I'm speaking of Martha's anger as she approaches Jesus and complains, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Every one of us knows what it's like to be angry and perhaps you like me, have found times when you have been angry at God for whatever reason. Jesus does not return Martha's anger with his own anger but instead admonishes her to see the situation in a larger perspective.

It's liberating to know that God is so caring and loving that he can take our anger and lovingly move us to a more productive and positive emotions.

Still, even though I find anger to be frightening when it arises in me I know I can work on identifying the causes and triggers of my anger. These days what is most frightening to me, and I think to many of us, is the free floating anger in the world around us, internationally, nationally, locally and even at times here at St. Mary's, anger that finds focus in terribly destructive words and actions.

We see the anger manifested in the almost daily accounts of gun violence in places like St. Paul, Baton Rouge, Dallas, Chicago, and elsewhere in this country and it's no news to any of you that people are killed daily with guns here in the Bay Area.

It's not just guns coupled with angry acts by mentally unstable individuals, who may or may not be affiliated with some terrorist group. We live in a world where anger filled violence abounds as the Bastille Day massacre in Nice again reminded us. Nowhere seems to be safe from anger and violence any more.

How do we cope with all this anger? The gospel gives us a pretty clear answer to that question.

Jesus responded to Martha's anger by urging her to "choose the better part which will not be taken away." The better part is to draw closer to Jesus, what he teaches, how he lived and how he loved. We, like Mary and Martha, and countless very ordinary followers of Jesus down through the centuries are called deal with our anger and the anger in our world by "choosing the better part."

Study the life of St. Paul and you'll discover someone who was more or less ruled by anger and hatred for Christians until Paul finally had a life-changing encounter with Jesus. It is Paul who dealt with his anger and spent the rest of his life urging people to embrace Jesus and live life from a Christ-like perspective.

In these troubled angry times I urge each of us to live by this advice from the Apostle Paul.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." Romans 12:9-12

May each of us live and act in ways that embrace the "better part....Martha did, St. Paul did, and so can each of us. AMEN