

Presence and Availability

July 22, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

This Sunday might be called *Mary and Martha* Sunday for the Church, one of those occasions when women take center stage, as good or bad examples, featured in the course of Jesus' ministry, as illustrations of grace, doubt, belief, faithfulness, or healing. Perhaps we think of this as a kind of relaxed lesson, set in the soft confines of a working household, where women followed certain patterns and roles unflinchingly. And, of course Mary stands out as pretty radical for not continually wearing her apron.

Martha was in the kitchen cooking up a big dinner. What she didn't realize, with sweat beading on her forehead and flour all over her apron, was that her sister Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, was being just as effortful as she was. Really? She's sitting there soaking up all that religion and never once moving a finger and she's *working*? Yes. The truth is Mary wasn't being lazy, anything but. It's just that Mary's

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effort was in the form of *presence* and *availability* to Jesus. She could, like Martha, have been present in the house but unavailable. She could have been present to Jesus, but with her mind on what was burning up on the stove, or how many disciples there were and how much they would they eat and she *still* would have been unavailable. She might have been at the feet of Jesus, but her heart and mind would have stayed in the kitchen.

Presence and availability are born of focus, or total concentration and what is required for that is the setting aside of self. This means the bracketing of our agendas, as wonderful and necessary as we tell ourselves they are, bracketing those agendas to be present and available to God or to one another. It means not being divided, not thinking of what you are going to say while the other is talking; not balancing the checkbook while another talks to us over the

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phone; or, not sending up a few prayers in the midst of rush hour traffic and calling it *prayer time*.

We all know that such presence and availability do not come easily. That is why they are effortful. There is nothing *natural* about setting aside my time, my heart and my mind to be present and available to God, or a spouse, or a child or a friend. It is a *discipline*, this setting aside of ourselves. It says, in effect, *I care about you and there is nothing more important to me than you. I am fully present and available to hear what you have to say.* Putting aside our natural self-centeredness *is* effortful. To make ourselves vulnerable, to actually encounter the other and enter his, or her, reality; to move out of what has been called *dialogues of the deaf* in which no one really listens *is* effortful.

Our schools: grade schools, high schools and universities spend an enormous amount of time in

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teaching us how to read and comprehend, a small amount of time in teaching us how to speak and usually *no* time in teaching us how to listen, to be present and available to one another. Listening well is an exercise of attention and, by necessity, hard work.

Being present and available to Jesus, as Mary was, is hard work and this hard work is the *essence* of prayer. It is in this holy encounter that we often discover the living water of the Spirit welling up within us. Repetition, through presence and availability in prayer is the key to spiritual growth. To come sit before Jesus, as Mary did, listening to his word and allowing the spring of the Spirit to bubble up, is a practice that needs to be nurtured whether one is feeling *moved by the Spirit*, or not. Can you imagine Tiger Woods practicing for the British Open golf championship, being played this weekend *only* when he felt moved to do so? Or, Federer, Sharipova or the Williams sisters starting to warm up a week before the mid-August

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opening of the U. S. Tennis Open? Or a famous novelist only working when they felt like it? The answer is obviously *no* to all of the above. The same is true of prayer. Faithfulness through repetition, independent of the state of our feelings, makes growth in prayer possible.

In that case, how do we keep from getting the blahs in being present and available in prayer? How do we stay fresh, carrying the same wonder and excitement Mary did in listening to Jesus? Mary's gift to us, through her example, is one of *being* rather than *hustling* and *doing*. There is, of course, plenty to be done and it has aptly been pointed out that Martha's *doing* made Mary's opportunity for *being* possible. We should remember, I think, that the Marys of this world are not absent from earthly life, quite the opposite. They are engaged in the real beingness of daily existence along with their fellow human beings, hurting with them, caring for them, praying with them, listening to them.

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It's just that they don't believe for a moment that they're doing it all through their own power.

Seeking God out in all our circumstances, reaffirming the connecting cord, admitting that we can do nothing on our own, *all* strengthen our immersion in the truth that in God we live and move and have our being. Prayer as a discipline has the greatest force in strengthening the spiritual life only as we yearn to pray without ceasing. No spiritual work is ever firmly established and this is especially true in prayer. We can train ourselves to invoke God's presence in every action we perform. Prayer can be fresh and lively if each time we pray we approach it as though we had never prayed before. Habit will be confirmed in gracious interaction and our whole lives will be bathed in the presence of God. Constant prayer will be no more a burden to us than wings are a burden to a bird in flight.

AMEN.