

This story of Martha and Mary is often interpreted as being about the difference between the contemplative life and the active life. This is a very shallow interpretation of this great story. We Benedictines know that this is a shallow interpretation because we know that the distinction between the contemplative life and the active life is a false one. None of us are called to be merely contemplative. None of us are called to be merely active. All of us are called to contemplation and all of us are called to action. That is why our Benedictine motto is "Work and Prayer!" Let us recall the story again: Jesus was visiting the home of Martha and Mary. Martha was attending to the practical details of hospitality. She was cooking. She was cleaning. She was setting the table. She was very busy with all of the things required for hospitality. Meanwhile her sister, Mary was attending to other, less practical details of hospitality. She was listening. She was meekly sitting at the Lord's feet, thinking not of herself, but thinking of him, the guest. Mary, Martha's sister, in this gospel scene, is the model of authority because she is portrayed as simple. She is portrayed as nondescript. She is the model of authority because her personality doesn't get in the way of her submission to the Word of God. Meanwhile, Martha, dear Martha, was allowing all sorts of things to get in the way of her submission to the Word of God! Every time she looked into the room where Mary and Jesus were, she got more and more angry. She made more and more judgements. She justified her anger and judgments every time she looked at Mary and Jesus in the room. Finally, she wouldn't keep silent. Finally, she wouldn't hold her tongue because she felt justified to judge her sister and Jesus, saying to him, "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work?" This gospel story reminds us that self-justification and judging others go together. This gospel story reminds us that justification by grace and serving others go together.

The story of Martha and Mary is told to remind us that seeds of discord are among us. The story of Martha and Mary is told because it is vitally important that we do everything we can to eradicate this discord. The story of Martha and Mary is told lest we forget how easy and even natural it is for us to compare ourselves to others, to judge others and condemn others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran Pastor lived at a time of great discord, not only in society, but in the Church. Bonhoeffer was inspired with an urgency to rid the Church of discord. He understood that discord kept the Church from being what Christ intended it to be; discord kept it weak. Bonhoeffer died in a concentration camp for defying the Nazi Government by conducting an underground seminary, or what he called, "a seminary on the run." It was during this time that Bonhoeffer began to understand his life as a sort of monastic life. Life on the run and the profound experience of Christ in this underground seminary were the basis for one of his books, entitled, "Life Together." Bonhoeffer was concerned that the Christian Community be authentic and true to the Word of God and that it rid itself of discord. He understood all too well that the seeds of destruction of the Christian Community lie within...not without. His concern was that Christians take the responsibility for themselves to become more and more like Christ and thereby build stronger Christian Communities. He urged Christians to take seriously 7 ministries, which might be understood as a summary of the 72 good works outlined in Chapter 4 of the Rule of Saint Benedict. These 7 ministries are:

1. The Ministry of holding one's tongue
2. The ministry of meekness
3. The ministry of listening
4. The ministry of helpfulness
5. The ministry of bearing one another's burdens
6. The ministry of proclaiming the Word of God through our ordinary lives
7. The ministry of exercising authority as did Jesus who, himself, lived as a brother among brothers and sisters and who submitted himself like them to the Word of God.

The Catholic Church, a church riddled with scandal, needs Christian Communities—like ours—that understand how vital it is to rid themselves of discord. Let's face it: none of our Communities are what they proclaim to be, brothers and sisters dwelling in unity. There is discord among us and we are all too quick to blame the discord on others. But the discord is within each of us and each time we resist discord, we build up true Christian Community. We resist discord when we hold our tongue instead of murmuring, thereby building up the Body of Christ. When we adopt meekness, we understand ourselves as the greatest of sinners. We do not compare our sins to other people's but understand that there is no excuse or apology for our own sinfulness. When we do this, we turn our backs to discord, truly becoming Communities of Christ's forgiveness. When we learn to listen to our Brothers and Sisters as closely as we listen to the Word of God we become loving Christian Communities. When our hands are not too good or too busy for deeds of everyday helpfulness, we are Christian communities where discord has no place and that convincingly proclaim the message of God's love and mercy. When we allow the freedom of another and even suffer because the exercise of this freedom irritates or offends us, but we bear it patiently, as the Holy Rule says, we become more and more aware that we too are being patiently bourn by others. Then the seeds of discord will not sprout, and our communities will be true sanctuaries for the weary. Proclaiming Christ does not come principally from preaching. Christ is principally proclaimed by the way we speak to one another. Christians have no time for discord when they speak to one another knowing that each is a sinner and is lost if not given help. Our authority comes from being like Christ, a true servant to all. Perhaps this authority seems all too hard to recognize in our church today. But each of us has the possibility to make the authority of the Church more recognizable each time we listen and submit ourselves to the Word of God.

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The Good News of the Gospel is that simple hospitality can heal our communities of discord.