

The Goodness of Giving:

Does your ministry distract you from pursuing the divine?

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Wow!! I am so busy!! On the average day, I get up – which is hard enough. Spend some time with the children preparing for the day, I go to the parish, meet with people, come up with ideas and new initiatives, find people to carry them out, visit, take home communion, contribute to the wider church, create relationships between the Church and the secular world, write pew bulletins and articles, take funerals, prepare for weddings, teach children about baptism and holy communion, prepare activities, answer phone calls, answer emails, rosters, prepare sermons, not to mention all of the time building relationships and creating fellowship, go home, do shopping, cook dinner, spend time with the children, have a conversation with my husband and eventually go to bed in a heap. I have way too many tasks! It is so hard for me to focus on God – when there is so much work to be done!

I can't imagine I'm the only one who faces the rush of everyday life. Children, work, emails that now conveniently come directly to your phone so there is no escaping work even on your holidays. The guilt of not spending time with your kids, house maintenance, phone calls, cooking, work life, home life,

family life. Not to mention taking kids to football, ballet, yourself to book club or yoga – there is barely time to fit anything else in!

It is interesting the amount of times when I ask someone to do a ministry task – whether it is changing a light bulb, writing a piece or building up a community and you get the litany of tasks. Yeah but I have.....the list is never ending. I couldn't possibly have time for anything else.

Now all of these tasks are well and good. Some of the tasks are beautiful ministry activities – like volunteering of your time to build up the Church community. But we have lost sight of God when what started out in faith and good intentions ends up being another burden to add on our 'to do' list. I wonder if this has ever happened to you? When do the tasks or ministries that were initially taken on to help build your relationship with God become a burden? In other words, has your ministry ever come between you and the divine?

This is what is happening in the Gospel today with Mary and Martha.

Now let's look at this text in context.

In the lead up to the Martha and Mary story we have the parable of 'The Good Samaritan'. The scene is set for this parable with: *Just then a lawyer*

stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'

This is when Jesus demonstrates God's ultimate love and hospitality to all by telling the parable of 'The Good Samaritan'. Jesus demonstrates how to love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus addresses the second commandment about loving neighbour in answer to the lawyers' question. But he doesn't go into the first commandment about loving God with all your mind, soul and strength. Is it a coincidence that the next scene is with Martha and Mary? Mary who is listening at the feet of Christ while Martha is running about with her many tasks, meanwhile resenting her sister for not pulling her weight?

I wonder if we do that. When we are overwhelmed with tasks and we then start getting judgemental of others who are not 'stepping up' and pulling their weight.

We have Martha who welcomes Jesus at the door – showing beautiful hospitality. Now imagine you have been invited into someone’s home for dinner. They greet you at the door and then run off and you never see them again because they are preparing an amazing banquet for you. But you never see them, you never speak to them, they are too busy making ‘you’ a delicious meal that they are never present to you. I’m sure we have all done it. Chosen an overly complicated meal to impress our guests then subsequently neglected them over the course of the night. It is the most ridiculous thing that we do!! We start out with inviting someone over to get to know them, to invite them into a relationship and then we stop relating to them because suddenly it is about the meal – not about the relationship. What??? Seriously! Next time you are tempted to do this – buy take out! While you are awkwardly sitting there because your ‘host’ is too busy preparing the banquet that they don’t speak to you. Their sister or partner comes in. They sit down with you, ask about you, listen to you, they are completely present to you. This is true hospitality. Not an amazing and complicated banquet, but to be truly present with someone – to give them your undivided attention.

Now you must take into account that in Ancient Jewish society, the banquet – the welcoming, meal and hospitality was the woman’s role. Martha is just following the model that she has been given. Mary is practicing a new form of ‘hospitality’ being present and focusing on God. This would have been revolutionary for the time.

As Martha is slaving away, she is getting herself pretty worked up that Mary is being lazy, and leaving her with all the work. I wonder – is Martha losing focus? Is her focus on her guest - or her meal? It becomes all about the meal. The meal has become the focus – not her relationship with Christ. Martha has become judgemental of her sister. She is overburdened and overwhelmed and then sees her sister sitting serenely – not stressed at all. I can feel Martha’s blood pressure rising!

Then comes that moment that we all dread. You know. When you are out for dinner with a couple who start bickering – you politely ignore it and try not to get involve and then they turn to you as one – and ask ‘What do you think?’

Poor Jesus. He handles it so well. He says “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’

There is only need for one thing....

I wonder what that can be? The first commandment: Love the lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Can we be fully in love with God when we are overburdened and feeling resentful? Can we love each other when we are getting resentful and judgemental over our chosen tasks? Our ministry should bring us joy because we are participating in building up God's Kingdom. Whatever your ministry is – being on the mowing roster, making morning tea, music, admin, welcoming - from the smallest thing to the biggest thing. And why do we do these things? Because we are giving our love to God by building up the Body of Christ in the world. By building up the 'Church' which we all know is not the building, the Church is 'us' – we are building up the Body of Christ in the world.

Yet sometimes we let the ministry tasks distract us. They become an 'end' in itself. Martha's focus should have been on her guest and the meal is merely a tool to bring people together in fellowship. The meal is not the goal – it is a way to build relationship and in this case – her guest was Christ. Do we let our 'tasks' become an end in themselves? Or do they point towards an ever evolving relationship with God?

When we give of ourselves, the 'giving' is not what we are trying to achieve. It is not the feel good moment that is gone 30 seconds later. This is too near sighted. When we give of ourselves, to one another, to the Church community, we are giving back to God in thanks with joy for all of the gifts that we have been given. We can never lose sight of God's Kingdom in the rush of life and let menial tasks become our goals. We have to think bigger and we can never let ourselves judge what we give by what others are giving – like Martha's complaint about Mary not doing enough.

The tasks and ministries are all good things – they are to take us on a journey to God. They are not the end of the journey – they are tools that we use to build up God's Kingdom along the way. It is when we lose sight of the 'real journey' that we start to resent what we do and look to others in judgement.

Think about your life. All of the busyness. What is your goal that overarches all of these things? Do you have a motivator? Is it being a good parent? Being a good partner? Being good at your job? Or is it to build up God's Kingdom one bit at a time? And trust me – all these things will not fall by the wayside. Loving God first with everything you have is entering into a love beyond your wildest dreams. That love helps you to love all those around you more

and to slow down and just 'be present' with those you love. You will never neglect those you love, your love for them will grow stronger if you seek a relationship with the divine beyond all else – without neglecting everything else. You can give your loved ones the ultimate gift in both service and presence and give more of yourself to your friends and family, to give more of yourself to the Kingdom of God.