

“Choose the New Life in Christ!”

“Erma Bombeck, the author, who wrote ‘If Life Is A Bowl Of Cherries, What Am I Doing Here In The Pits’, tells of two moments in her husband’s life: There was a time when the children were growing up that her husband used to go and look at the back yard. Surveying the muddy patches where the lawn should be, he would wonder – Will the grass ever come back?

And then there was the time when the children were grown and gone that her husband went and looked over the beautiful green lawn, immaculate from lack of use and wondered – Will the children ever come back?” (As told by Richard J. Fairchild, The Better Part)

Erma Bombeck’s husband’s back yard experience showed both the temptation to only see things from a short-term point of view – the grass can’t grow because of the children, while it also showed his lack of hope and reason for joy – the children will never come back. In the Scripture Reading, **Martha also gave into the temptation to only see things from a short-term view and she gave little to no focus on a lasting reason for faith and hope.** Further, Martha fell prey to jealousy and the desire to be raised up at her sister, Mary’s expense. Are you and I giving into the temptation to only see things from a short-term point of view? Do we use religion as a way to lift up our importance at the expense of someone else’s dignity or reason for hope and faith?

Before delving into our Reading, let me share a few observations about its unique aspects.

- ✓ **First, Mark and Matthew, the other two Synoptic gospels, do not have a version of this story, so it is from Luke’s special source.**
- ✓ **Second, neither Mark nor Matthew even mention these two sisters in their gospels.**
- ✓ **Third, although Luke included this story about Martha and Mary, he never mentioned they had a brother, Lazarus, nor the name of the village where they lived – Bethany.**

So, those three points lift up a couple of questions from me of – “Why didn’t Matthew and Mark even mention Martha and Mary? Why did Luke leave out any recognition that Martha and Mary had a brother named Lazarus? Those questions come to my mind because in the Gospel of John, the family of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were reported as being especially important and dear to Jesus. It does not seem John made up this family – Luke’s special source, at least, recognized Jesus had some type of relationship with the sisters, Martha and Mary. So, why did Luke’s source leave Lazarus out of his report about this family and why did Mark and Matthew’s sources leave the whole family out of their accounts. My suspicion, which I have shared in the past, is the story of this family was too scandalous from those sources’ point of view. The scandal was Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, had been dead for a longer period of time, than Jesus would be before his resurrection, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead! Further, Lazarus was still alive for a long time after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension – departure. Acknowledging those facts could have seemed dangerous because some believers might have incorrectly interpreted this situation to mean Lazarus was greater than Jesus. It seems to me, Matthew and Mark left out all mention of Martha and Mary to prohibit any mention of Lazarus. Although Luke mentioned the sisters, please note, he did not give the name of the village where Martha and Mary lived in his terse and sparse account in today’s Reading. Mentioning Bethany might have jogged someone’s recollection about the raising of Lazarus.

On the other hand, Luke’s unfamiliarity with Jewish traditions and requirements led him to inadvertently create a different scandal about this family. Since Luke did not mention Martha and Mary had a brother living with them, his account was scandalous. **A Jewish man was not to associate with any woman of whom he was unrelated!** By excluding the mention of a brother for Martha and Mary and by not claiming they were Jesus’ relatives, Luke unknowingly made it look like Jesus associated with the two women, who were not related to him. That would have been great ammunition against Jesus for the Pharisees and their allies.

Now, let's examine today's Scripture to see what it reveals about the New Life in Christ. Luke provided us the strange setting of Jesus being hosted in a woman's home in **verse 38**, "*As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him in her home.*" Luke is either oblivious to this scandal or he simply fails to explain why this visit was not a scandal.

The gospel author continued to set up the situation, so Martha would have a justification to ask Jesus to rebuke her sister Mary. Luke reported in **verse 39**, "*She had a sister named Mary, who sat down at the feet of the Lord and listened to his teaching.*" Luke, evidently, did not comprehend Mary being at Jesus' feet would have also been perceived by the Jews as scandalous. Like Martha, Luke seems to have been focused on providing the reason for her unhappiness, so he wrote in **verse 40**, "*Martha was upset over all the work she had to do, so she came and said, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!'*" I don't know how that sounds to you but to me it sounds like Martha was angry at and challenging Jesus in addition to denouncing her sister, Mary! Now being a great host or hostess is valuable and important. Indeed, a frequently repeated aspect of our ministry together is showing everyone extravagant and radical hospitality! Since Luke's report is so terse, we don't know if Jesus told Martha to not worry about providing them refreshments. Yet, it is clear she went from being a good hostess to being an angry and vindictive sibling of Mary. She went from serving everyone to seeking to puff herself up at the expense of humiliating her supposed lazy and thoughtless sister! While doing that, Martha also threw in scolding Jesus for allowing Mary to shirk her hosting responsibilities! So, Martha sought to receive greater praise by putting down both her sister and her Teacher.

At first, Luke indicated Jesus tried to reveal to Martha how she was taking too short-term a view of what was important. He announced what he was talking about to Mary and the others listening to his teaching was that more important concern when in **verses 41 and 42**, "*The Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha! You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed.'*" You may have already suspected that what I am going to suggest is Jesus was talking about the New Life in Christ! Yes, how we are to live out our New Faith Relationship with God, one another, and with all people was frequently the focus of Jesus' teachings. Jesus was trying to help Martha understand perceiving and choosing to live the New Life in Christ was the "one thing needed"!

However, since Martha gave into the temptation to justify herself at her sister's expense, Jesus continued to say to the self-righteous sister in **verse 42**, "*Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken away from her.*" Yes, Mary had begun to recognize what Jesus was teaching was of extraordinary importance for both her own life and faith. Mary had chosen the New Life in Christ over the praise of being a good hostess!

Because Luke's account is so brief, we are not told Martha's final response to Jesus' declaration that Mary had chosen what was most important. However, if we study the family of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in the Gospel of John, then we discover, they loved him and he loved them greatly. Indeed, his emotional tie with them was so great, he cried several times as he sought to reveal the truth about himself being the resurrection and the life through the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

You and I are also invited and called to decide if we are going to be like Erma Bombeck's husband with his short-term point of view and lack of faith and hope or like Martha's sister, Mary. **Let us – you and me rejoice in Jesus' invitation to be in the New Faith Relationship with our Divine Parent, as we live the Agape Loving New Life in Christ!** Let's not use religion as a way of justifying ourselves by putting others down but, instead, allow God's Agape – Self-giving and Suffering Love for us shown in God's Son, Jesus Christ, to transform our lives and relationships, so we choose the New Life in Christ with its agape love, instead of, the doomed and self-centered way of life encouraged by the world and those, who tempt us to chase after wealth and fame with its heavy cost to others. **Choose the New Life in Christ! Amen.**