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“Are you listening to me?”

It’s the question I ask the most of my sons. I have never kept count of how many times I ask it in a day. I don’t think I want to know.

But the truth is, we all spend so much of our time talking...and not enough time listening. I mean really listening, not just hearing. You can *hear* someone talk and not listen to a word they say. Listening means more than waiting for the other person to take a breath, just so you can jump in with whatever you were going to say even before they started. Listening means giving your full attention to the one speaking.

But, truth be told, most of us are Martha’s. In today’s Gospel, Jesus visits the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha is rushing about, attending to the things most of us attend to when a guest comes over. She is cooking or pouring Jesus a glass of wine or straightening up the living room or whatever...she isn’t doing anything wrong particularly, but there is one thing she is not doing, and Jesus is quick to point that thing out.

Martha is not listening to him.

But Mary is.

Martha, Jesus says, *rest your hands, come and sit and listen to me.*

And it is good advice, because things are about to get ugly for these two sisters.

Very soon, their oldest brother Lazarus is going to get sick.

And they will send for Jesus to come and heal him.

And Jesus will not show up in time.

And Lazarus will die.

When Jesus does show up, the sisters say to him, “Jesus, if you had been here, our brother would not have died.”

Now let me just add at this point that today’s Gospel does not say that Martha continued to scurry about her tasks. In fact, I’d like to think she took Jesus’ advice, hung up the dishtowel and sat and his feet and listened to him, right next to Mary. I can’t help but think she did that, because when her brother does die, and when Jesus does show up, Martha knows her stuff.

Lord, she says as she sobs over her dead brother, *I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who has come into the world to bring life beyond the grave.*

And then to prove that he has power over death, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

So, it seems, then, that somewhere along the line, Martha has done a great deal of listening to Jesus, before things got ugly, so she would have something to lean on when her life fell apart with the death of her only brother.

Listen to me, when life gets ugly and messy, is Jesus’ only plea in today’s Gospel.

I require only one thing from you, Jesus says—*listen to me!*

Life was no simpler for Mary and Martha than it is for us. Life was no tidier, no easier long ago than it is today. Since the very beginning, life has been hard and messy...but it is messy, remember, because we made it that way. God told us not to eat that fruit, but we ate it anyway, because we thought we knew better than God. And we still think we know better than God....

Because we are no better at listening today than Adam and Eve were.

In our lives, there is so much talk...talk about issues, about crimes, about current events, about policies, about institutions and organizations and governments...there is much talk about people and there is gossip and slander and deceit and there are lies and white-lies and half-truths. We spend a lot of time talking—it has always been this way—and not enough time listening, either to each other, or to God.

Why?

What's the risk?

Are we afraid of being changed, by each other or by God?

Mary and Martha took that risk when they sat down and Jesus' feet. "Ok," they must have thought, "we will listen, but what is Jesus going to say to us?"

Jesus tells them what they need to know for the coming times when things get ugly and messy for them. Jesus tells them, "Remember, no matter what happens, I have power over death. Remember, my grace and my love are more powerful than your sin and your brokenness. Remember this when things get ugly."

We need to take these words into our hearts, too, and hold onto them for the times when life is ugly and messy for us...times when our marriages fall apart, times when your wives are diagnosed with cancer, times when your husbands die in farming accidents, times when your daughters get pregnant before marriage, times when your sons decide to drive drunk, times when you talk about things you don't like, times when you have a hard time getting out of bed for fear of what others are saying about you. There are many times in life that are messy and ugly, and such times are when we cling to truths of faith, but we can only cling to them if we believe them, and we can only believe them if we hear Jesus say them, and we can only hear Jesus say them if we close our mouths from time to time to listen.

Yes, there is a time to talk and to debate and deliberate and discern.

But there is also a time to listen...for the voice of God, which the prophet Elijah did not hear in the wind or in the earthquake or in the raging fire...but in the silence afterwards...then, he heard the still, small voice of God, assuring him that all will be well...and Elijah needed to hear that, because life had turned very ugly for him, because he had called the king and queen idolaters and they were searching for him to kill him and he was terrified so he ran and hid on a mountain, where, after the deafening noise, he heard the still, small voice of God...and the prophet Elijah closed his mouth and listened to the voice of God...

...the same voice that Mary and Martha listened to...the voice that assures us that the ugliness and messiness of life recede only at his command...that the raging storms stop only at his word...that death and disease and division heal only because of his death on the cross.

Now is the time to listen, as Abraham did, as Moses did, as the prophets did, as Mary and Martha did...now is a good time to hang up the dishtowel, to turn the stove off, to leave the lawn mowing until later, now is a good time to sit at Jesus' feet and listen... Let us close our mouths from time to time, so that we can listen to the voice of Jesus say to us, "Peace be with you. My peace I give to you...not like the peace the world offers, but real peace, true peace. Calm down. And rest. And listen."