

# Being and Doing

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## Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "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."

The memory is still fresh in my mind all these years later. It was a history class of one sort or another, and my instructor arrived a couple of minutes late brandishing a set of photocopies, which he promptly distributed to the students. "Here, you've got to read this," he said, almost breathlessly.

What he set before us was chapter seven of Thomas Merton's book *No Man Is an Island*. The chapter, entitled "Being and Doing," drew a distinction between the two, suggesting that one's worth is determined not so much by what we do as by who we are. "We must find our real selves not in the froth

stirred up by the impact of our being upon the beings around us,” Merton wrote, “but in our soul which is the principle of all our acts.”<sup>1</sup>

Merton went on to say that frenzied activity – Doing – was detrimental to the soul. “Stagnation and activity bring spiritual death,” he wrote. “But my soul must not project itself entirely into the outward effects of its activity.”<sup>2</sup>

**M**erton’s essay about Being and Doing calls to mind this morning’s Gospel. Jesus visits a small village in the course of his long journey to Jerusalem. We don’t know the circumstances of his visit, but he winds up somehow at the home of a woman named Martha and her sister Mary. Both, we assume, had heard of this remarkable man from Nazareth, and both of them, no doubt, wanted to learn more, to sit at his feet.

But Martha retires to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Mary remains in the parlor, hanging on every word. Martha’s sense of duty and responsibility demands that she busy herself with preparations. She’s angry and resentful. Who knows what history or provocation between the sister colors the relationship? But Martha, boiling with resentment, burst from the kitchen, whisk in hand, her apron already stained, and demands that Jesus instruct her sister to get into the kitchen and help.

I wonder if Jesus paused for a beat and considered the situation before he stepped into the middle of a sibling dispute. Luke doesn’t tell us. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing,” Jesus says. And then he adds: “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

**F**or some of us, this is a difficult passage. We define ourselves, especially we Americans, by our work, by what we do. We derive satisfaction from

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1955), 117

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

our work; we point to our list of accomplishments and imply that these attainments – business success, professional recognition – somehow validate our worth. Consider even social interactions. Once we learn someone’s name, we ask, “What do you do?” or, “What line of work are you in?”

Nothing wrong with that, I suppose. But Thomas Merton cautions us against finding our whole identity in What we Do rather than Who we Are. Like Jesus in his admonition to Martha, Merton warns against frenetic activity, especially when it becomes obsessive, because it is never enough. “The activity that was meant to exalt him,” Merton writes, “reproaches and condemns him. It is never real enough. The less he is able to *be* the more he has to *do*.”<sup>3</sup>

“We have to learn to commune with ourselves before we can communicate with other men,” Merton continues. “A man who is not at peace with himself necessarily projects his interior fighting into the society of those he lives with, and spreads a contagion of conflict all around him.”<sup>4</sup>

Mary, Jesus said, had “chosen the better part,” the way of reflection over action, Being over Doing.

**I**s this always the course, the way of contemplation over action? No, not always. And I suspect the vestry would be a tad upset with me if I insisted that the spiritual life consisted only of reflection and contemplation. And justifiably so. There are lawns to cut, after all, and bulletins to produce and a coffee hour to attend to. But today’s Gospel reminds us of the importance of tending also to our inner selves, dialing back on the activity and feeding the soul. There are many ways to do this. Reading. Turning off the television and resisting the internet. Silence. Think about how unsilent our world is. Noise everywhere. Sirens. Music. Muzak in the elevator and the grocery store and now even, God help us, at the gasoline pump. Spend an hour or

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

two sitting beneath the stars and listening to the sounds of the night. And I'd like to think that an hour here at Christ Church on Sunday morning helps to tend the inner self and feed the soul.

Merton again: "There are times, then, when in order to keep ourselves in existence at all we simply have to sit back for a while and do nothing. And for a man who has let himself be drawn completely out of himself by his activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, doing nothing at all. The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act he can perform: and often it is quite beyond his power."<sup>5</sup>

That professor from thirty years ago became one of my closest friends, and we remain in regular contact to this day. I've always half suspected that he had me in mind when he brought that chapter from *No Man Is an Island* to class, except that I know that Doug himself fought those same demons: "nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest."

And that brings to mind another restless soul with whom I'll conclude today's sermon. "We are restless," St. Augustine prayed, "until we find our rest in you."

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 123.