Good Enough is Good Enough

I hate getting things wrong. Even if it’s just a matter of personal opinion, never feel safe with one absolute answer. In one of the thousands of grueling interviews in the process of becoming a Priest, one of my interviewers asked me “So, who’s your favorite author?” Simple question, no? He was just trying to help me relax.

My internal dialog took off at the speed of panicked light. I’m thinkin’ “Well, it’s probably Tim Powers, but I really like James Blaylock, and then there’s Avram Davidson, and what about Jonathan Carroll, he’s good. But wait. This guy is probably asking for an author he’s heard of. Who’s my favorite popular contemporary author? Oh, no. There are so many and I can’t think of one right now. I’m doomed.” I froze like a chicken looking at a snake. The thing that was hanging me up was the limitations of that word ‘favorite’. You can only have one favorite. How can I possibly choose, and leave all the others behind?

Here’s another absolute that always trips me up: “We don’t mind if you don’t succeed as long as you just do your best.” I heard this all through my childhood. Talk about agonizing self-evaluation. Did I really do my best? Wasn’t there just a little more effort left in me that would have made my efforts better? Can we ever really do our whole-hearted best? How do we evaluate ‘best’ if not by results? What if my best still isn’t good enough?

No wonder we find ourselves obsessed with success – we’re always worrying about doing our best in every situation, always feeling as though we’ve fallen short. That’s the problem with absolutes, like the best, the brightest, the most, the finest. “I’m doing the best I can” is usually the cry of someone at the end of their rope. Well, I have great news for us today, Yes indeed. First a quick word about the Gospel of Luke. The author of the Gospel of Mark is driving his narrative along toward the crucifixion. Matthew is concerned about judgement (I think of him as Mr. Gnashing of Teeth), the crucifixion and the resurrection. Luke seems to be more interested in the phenomenon of God walking around with us as one of us. He’s interested in prayer, attentiveness to the Word, and the role of women. He’s practical and concrete about how to manifest God’s kingdom here and now.

This week, with the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus lets us off the hook of ‘doing our best’. Instead, He invites us in to a party that celebrates everything and everyone. God’s word to us today is this: Relax. Lighten up. Show up and God will do the rest.

In the Gospel story today, Martha invites Jesus and the disciples in for supper. As soon as he and the disciples are sitting down, she starts running around putting together something special
for them. This seems okay -- I mean it must be alright to show our love for God by offering our best. But at some point she looks around for her sister Mary because she needs some help, and eeek! Mary is sitting down with the men, listening to Jesus.

Well, Martha gets into a small uproar about this. Did you notice, though, that instead of going and simply asking Mary to come into the kitchen to help, she goes straight to the Lord, and asks him to scold Mary for not helping?

Poor Martha has forgotten that she is doing this for love. Somehow, all her work has become something else. It’s stopped being a joyful offering to God out of love, and has become a chore, a duty, an unwilling sacrifice. She wants her best to be the only kind of ‘good enough’ that counts.

Now isn’t that just like us? We think that making tremendous efforts that we resent having to make is what makes us worthwhile people. We forget that there’s a difference between what we do and who we are in the mind and heart of God.

Anyway, here poor Martha has fallen into that trap, and she wants Jesus to scold Mary for not being more like Martha. Like any human, she wants praise and recognition. Blessedly, what Jesus has for her is something better.

Jesus says "Martha, Martha, my dear one -- we don't need your fanciest cooking. We can have scrambled eggs. We don't need an immaculate house. We can vacuum and toss a dust rag around, and then be done. We don't need elaborate clothing or fancy seating arrangements with little name cards -- we'd rather have you sit down with us now and play."

My fantasy about what happens next in the story is this: after Jesus reminds Martha that it's okay to lighten up, she says 'of course, how could I have forgotten?' and goes and sits down with Mary and the other disciples. They listen and ponder and dwell deeply on the word of God. They have a great time, and then everybody gets up and scoots around to get dinner.

Jesus sets the table, Martha scrambles the eggs, Mary plays the piano, and the disciples do the dishes. It's not fancy, it's maybe not what Martha had in mind, but this time together is really not about how well or poorly Martha puts on a party. This time together is about laughter, and love, and good news and the presence of God.

What Mary is doing that is the ‘better part’ is that she is intensely attending to the Word of God. Remember, Luke is giving us a practicum of how to be a disciple. The parable of the Good Samaritan is yoked to the story of Martha and Mary. (Luke often does that, you know – he’ll have one illustration starring a man, followed immediately with an illustration featuring a woman. The good shepherd and the woman who loses the coin? Yah. Like that.)

Anyway, the Good Samaritan is an example of how we are meant to actually do things that make a difference. It’s all about acting on the word of God. Mary, on the other hand, is not
acting at all. Instead she’s receiving, she’s reflecting, she’s studying, and she’s hearing the Word. To be a good disciple, both are important.

The Good news is that God's love for us is not about what we do or about how well we do it. We can’t scrub our way into heaven. We also can’t 'manage' our way into the love of God. What we can do, what we must do, is to allow the love of God to fill our life with joy. Doing things out of love God, and attending intensely to God’s word out of joy is its own reward, of course.

Here’s the take-home message -- write this down. Overwork, over worry, anxiety, and superhuman efforts to do your best won’t make you any more beloved in God’s sight. When we make mistakes, or set ourselves at odds with God, God will do whatever is needed to bring us back into harmony with heaven and with each other.

God rejoices in our delight. God sends his word and his messengers to keep our spirits fed, and he wants us to revel in their message. In the face of all that, how can we possibly continue to worry about unimportant things? The word of the Lord today is this: 'Relax. Lighten Up! I'm here, I love you, I even made the whole world for you. You don’t need to do your best, you already are your best. Try hard, my dear hearts, not to worry.'

AMEN