

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

IT'S THE MAIN COURSE, NOT THE APPETIZERS

Luke 10:38-42

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By Steven E. Albertin

38Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40But 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." 41But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Note: Eugene Peterson in his The Message replaces the NRSV's "the better part" with "the main course." Since this passage is all about hospitality and the eating and drinking which usually accompanies it, translating "the better part" as "the main course" set off a whole array of related images in my mind that placed this story in the context of something to which we can all relate: eating in a restaurant. This image, however, is about much more than delighting our taste buds and satisfying our hungers. It is a metaphor for all of life and the many choices we must make every day. These choices inevitably reflect our relationship to God.

DIAGNOSIS: Missing the Main Course

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Looking for the Main Course...But Too Many Appetizers*

Go to a restaurant famous for steaks, and you may find that the long list of appetizers will easily distract you. Famished and hungry you want to try them all, even though you came to this place because of its reputation for the main course—the finest and most succulent of steaks.

Martha was flattered to have Jesus as a guest in her home. She wanted to honor him, but tried to do too much. In the process, what was supposed to be joy became a burden. She lost sight of the main course: Jesus. Martha got more entangled with cleaning the house and scrubbing the bathroom than with keeping her focus on the guest she had welcomed in the first place.

As such, Martha mirrors our all too often frantic attempts to have it all. We fear missing that one appetizer that will tantalize our famished taste buds like nothing else. However, in the process we get distracted from the main course. We expect the appetizer to give us what only the main course can provide. We came for steak. And while the spinach dip tantalizes, it does not satisfy. So we regret the spinach dip even though it never promised to satisfy our deeper hunger.

Our busy lives, filled with tight schedules and plenty of plans, become too much to bear. We end up resenting those things that were only supposed to be appetizers. We confused them with the main course. The daily work that was supposed to be a blessing to our neighbor and a delight for us, becomes resentment toward our neighbor and a burden to us.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Confusing the Main Course...with the Appetizers*

How could this ever have happened . . . to Martha and to us? How

could she and we have ever become so confused?

Martha's impulsive and insensitive question to Jesus reveals not only her confusion but that a heart and soul focused only on her self and her immediate gratification. Her question reveals her hostility to Jesus, her disgust with her sister, and her obsession with herself. All she can think of is ME. "Lord, do you not care that MY sister has left ME to do all the work by MYself. Tell her then to help ME."

Even more, Martha worries, a sure sign that her heart is confused and misfocused. She knows deep down that these appetizers are not working. She is afraid that they will not satisfy her hunger and still leave her craving. Instead of facing her own misjudgment, she wants to blame her sister. Instead of going to her sister, she goes to Jesus to complain about her sister, a classic case of triangulation.

We do the same thing—ordering too many appetizers and forgetting the main course. We grasp at the temporary appetizers with their exaggerated promises and fleeting delights, like tasty spinach dip or barbecued buffalo wings that electrify our taste buds but leave our appetites still yearning. The latest consumer purchase and hot deal satisfy us only for a day or two. Spinach dip and a new car will always leave us hungering for more. We have confused the appetizers with the main course. We have forgotten, ignored, or rejected the only main course that can ever satisfy our souls: God. Augustine reminds us that the temporary delights of appetizers can never substitute for the satisfaction of the main course when he said, "our souls are restless until we find our rest in Thee."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Losing the Main Course...Starving to Death*

Finally, Jesus confronts Martha with her misguided faith and

wrongheaded choices. Because she has set her heart on the appetizers instead of the main course, because she has trusted her own impulses instead of the promise of Jesus' presence, she is reaping the results. She is getting what she deserves. She has become angry, impatient, judgmental and selfish, just what you can expect to happen to someone whose hunger is only worsening and whose "blood sugar" has dropped too low. She needs the sustenance that only the main course (Jesus/God) can give her.

In contrast, Jesus points out how Mary has chosen rightly. She has focused on the main course instead of the appetizers and is reaping the results: the approval of Jesus. She is sitting patiently and hopefully at Jesus' feet, feeding on the food that satisfies: Jesus and his words of life. Martha has stuffed herself with appetizers and their temporary satisfaction. Now, still hungry and craving more, her unfaithfulness and poor choices are exposed.

We too are exposed and judged for bad faith and poor choices. Our continual blaming and excuse making, our complaining and whining, only further expose our plight. Having rejected the main course, we are starving to death. We have chosen our fate. We are suffering the consequences. Appetizers may make us salivate, but ultimately they will not sustain us.

PROGNOSIS: Choosing the Main Course

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Served the Main Course*

Jesus recognizes that Martha's confusion and bad faith have put her in a precarious position. Her anger and misery will only worsen. Jesus gets her attention calling out her name twice—not to reprimand her, but to redirect her attention and her faith to the main course. He points to Mary who is not frantically testing the appetizers. At the feet of Jesus, she is feasting on

the main course and is satisfied. That same gift Jesus offers Martha, even in the midst of her frantic, faithless and fruitless obsession with the appetizers.

Jesus reverses roles. Jesus is the host not Martha. But unlike Martha he does not go to Mary to complain about Martha. Instead, he speaks to Martha directly, and gently removes the appetizers with which Martha was stuffing herself, and he offers himself. He serves the main course. He IS the main course.

As the rest of the Gospel of Luke unfolds, Martha (and we) will see Jesus continually offering himself to those who are hungry and worried, continually sampling the appetizers, never making it to the main course and suffering the consequences. Even in the midst of complaining, griping, and triangulation, even though we can never seem to get past the appetizers, Jesus will not reject us. Even as Jesus hung on the cross, despised and rejected by those who foolishly thought that spinach dip was to be preferred over steak, he still forgives them . . . and us. He calls out our names (as he did to Martha) ... at the font, at the table, from the midst of the gathered community ... and offers the satisfaction no spinach dip can ever hope to match.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Savoring the Main Course

Our souls are at last at rest. Martha and we can join Mary at the feet of Jesus, savoring the main course, delighting in the satisfaction that only God in Jesus can provide. No longer distracted by the appetizers and their fleeting satisfactions, we can dig into the main course and savor the steak. Here we receive the value and fullness for which we have been endlessly searching the menu: "Martha, Martha. Here I am. I am here for you. Here is my body broken . . . and my blood shed for you. Eat and drink and you will be satisfied." Jesus is the ultimate "comfort food."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Serving the Main Course*

Fed and satisfied by the main course, we Marthas live our lives and serve our guests differently.

As delightful and delectable as the appetizers might be, we know they are not the main course. Living with a renewed sense of priorities, we will not be stuck endlessly sampling the appetizers and therefore pacifying our hunger for the main course. We can let the appetizers be the appetizers. The spinach dip is a warm up. We can leave room for the steak. Our daily work, the pleasures and joys of this world are “of this world” and nothing more. We can let the penultimate remain the penultimate and no longer have to raise them to ultimate. The creaturely can remain creature; it does not have to become our god. The appetizers can be what God made them to be: tantalizing foretastes of the feast—the main course to come.

As hybrid Mary/Marthas we can practice hospitality, welcoming strangers and serving our neighbors with the vigor and energy of Martha, offering them the appetizers of this delightful world God has made. We can enjoy this creation as a gift from God. Yet we also do it with an eye on the main course. With the peace and confidence of Mary we are at rest, freed from worry, patient, and no longer tempted to complain and triangulate, because we have already savored the main course . . . at the feet of Jesus.