

Landry: One call to find wholeness in both prayer and service

Without a doubt, one of my all-time favorite stories is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Of the many memorable characters, one of my favourites is Sam Gamgee, whom we first encounter early on in the *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Sam initially serves as Frodo's gardener, but becomes much more: traveling with Frodo to the end of the world and back in their quest to destroy the One Ring. Sam and Frodo's friendship is deep, battle-tested, and brotherly – and Frodo recognizes this, stating in *The Two Towers* that he “wouldn't have got far without Sam.”

At the end of *The Return of the King*, Frodo asks Sam to come on one final journey with him. Much to Sam's sorrow, Frodo is going leave the Shire for a place where, for once, Sam cannot go as well. Sam is now married, with a beautiful daughter, Elanor, and can no longer give Frodo the loyalty and attention that got them through *The Lord of the Rings* without neglecting his family. When Sam begins to protest, Frodo tells Sam: “Do not be too sad, Sam. You cannot be always torn in two. You will have to be one and whole, for many years.”

Sam's friendship and loyalty to Frodo is a wonderful, laudable thing. Many of Sam's actions throughout this story make the achievement of Frodo's quest to destroy the One Ring possible. His later vocation as a husband and father is also a wonderful, laudable thing – something Sam is only beginning to discover by the end of the story. But Frodo's words to him “you cannot be always torn in two” represent an important lesson for the rest of us, one that even Jesus reminds us about.

You likely recall the story of Jesus' time with Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). Mary and Martha are two sisters who respond to their encounter with the Lord in two very different ways: Martha, is concerned chiefly with service and hospitality for her guests while Mary relishes the opportunity to sit at Jesus' feet, listening to all he teaches. When Martha asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her with the hospitality, Jesus rebukes Martha for being “anxious and troubled” (Luke 10:41) while complimenting Mary for choosing “the better part” (Luke 10:42).

I've heard a number of different reflections on this passage. They tend to fall into a couple of categories. First, I've heard some beautiful talks challenging us to choose the better part, like Mary, and to deepen our life of prayer.

Second, I've heard it explained both Martha and Mary are doing necessary work.

Martha is active in serving others while Mary is contemplating the teaching of Christ. These are very definite Christian callings, often lived out in a distinctive way by religious orders who can be active in service (like Martha) or contemplative (like Mary).

But it is the words of St. Josemaria Escriva which gave me pause to look at this passage from a third angle:

“Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it... there is just one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is this life which has to become, in both soul and body, holy and filled with God. We discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things. There is no other way. Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find Him.”

You’ll recall that Jesus didn’t admonish Martha because she was serving: He reproved her for being worried and anxious as she did so. When St. Josemaria writes that we need to “learn to find our Lord ordinary, everyday life,” he is offering us a challenge to choose the better part not only when we pray, but at other times too.

We are called, like Sam Gamgee to be one and whole... but in our case, we don’t find wholeness by having to separate ourselves from one of these two good things (prayer and service). We are certainly all called to find those moments of silent contemplation at the feet of Jesus, as Mary did, and we are also called to be docile to God’s voice in those moments that we serve... because He is there, too.

Put a different way, Catherine Doherty speaks “the duty of the moment,” meaning whatever thing might be required of any one of us at any time, according to our state in life. Being single or married, with or without kids, with particular career responsibilities can require each of us to serve others when we’d much rather be sitting at the feet of Jesus contemplating his words.

Both Catherine Doherty and St. Josemaria Escriva would challenge us in those moments – whether it’s dishes, working, or the needs of a child – to learn to recognize, hear, and obey the Lord as he speaks to us there. In doing so, we too can learn to choose the better part without feeling torn apart.

– *Mike Landry is the chaplain for Evergreen Catholic Schools. He is based in Spruce Grove, Alberta.*