

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

July 18, 2010

Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

The Big Picture

Many of you know that in my previous existence, I was a nun – a Maryknoll Sister, to be exact. When I decided to go into the convent, the Mary and Martha passage was, I now think, a great influence on my decision. I pictured myself in some ethereal Mary universe where I floated through life dressed in my habit as I smiled beatifically while dispensing wisdom and joy to all. No housewifely duties for me. No home chores. No cooking or scrubbing in my life. I had chosen the better part, after all.

I had a rude awakening. Within 24 hours of walking through the convent doors I was handed an apron and scrub brush and told to get busy on the pots and pans. Later on I graduated to washing windows with vinegar, water, rags and old newspapers. But I am proud to say that my greatest accomplishment was cleaning toilets to the satisfaction of the Novice Mistress. So much for ethereal.

Both of today's readings include a theme of hospitality that includes preparing a meal for honored guests. The Abraham passage is both charming and weighty. In the manner of the desert, when Abraham saw three strangers coming toward his camp, he rushed forward to greet them and make them comfortable. He had Sarah bake bread that he presented to the guests in a ritual of welcome, signifying a pledge of safety for the guests. A meal was then provided to them. It is unclear if Abraham understood that he was in the presence of the Divine. I would prefer to think no. Abraham's essential goodness would be underscored if to him the guests were simply travelers in need of

nourishment that he was happy to provide. At any rate, at the end of the meal the mysterious Guest responded to the extravagant hospitality with the equally extravagant gift of announcing that a son would be born to Sarah. God spent the hot afternoon in the shade of a tent with Abraham just as God walked in Eden in the cool of the evening with Adam and Eve. Simple and powerful. God loved Abraham and that love is confirmed in the announcement of that miraculous birth. Responding to the sacred gift of hospitality God gave the sacred gift of a future to him who would become the great ancestor of the People of Israel.

I can't help wonder though if Abraham was aware of the identity of his guests. If so, can you imagine the conversation? "It's a scorcher today. Can I get you some more Pomegranate juice, God." "No thanks, Abraham, that was very refreshing. Pomegranates were one of my better ideas." "So, how are things in the universe?" "Could be worse. How are things with you?" "Can't complain, although my sciatica is acting up again." "Sorry about that Abe, my son, but let's face it you are getting old."

So, hospitality is rewarded in the Abraham passage but what about Mary and Martha? Not so simple, is it. You may be tired of hearing, yet again, this story about these two sisters. In fact, we can probably all tell the story without opening the Bible. And, at least among the women, we have our favorites. Some applaud Mary for walking away from all the busy preparations for a meal meant to feed twenty or more people. Some side with Martha upon whose shoulders falls the burden of preparing and serving all that food. Those of us who are the oldest in our families recognize ourselves in Martha. We grew up with the expectation that we would be the most responsible and steadfast in the family. Those who are among the youngest in the family may see in

Mary their own youthful ability to disappear when work needed to be done because the parents were too tired to chase them down.

So Mary sat down at the feet of Jesus with the other disciples and took in all the stories and parables and teachings of that session. As her heart and mind were being filled with the wisdom of her Master, Martha bustled about preparing the meal. She perhaps caught some of the words as she moved in and out of the area where the group was gathered. She would have loved to sit and listen as well but hospitality required her to provide a nourishing meal for the guests in her house. She could no sooner step away from that role than she could stop breathing. All of the mandates of her Judaism and all of the teachings of Jesus determined the way that Martha saw the world. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Welcome the stranger.” “Feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty.” “Shelter the homeless.” In those preparations for dinner, Martha was embodying the teachings that were simultaneously being absorbed by Mary. No, this passage is not easy. But it is very human, right down to sibling rivalry and hurt feelings.

Theologians urge us to read beyond the human emotions in order to understand the meaning. This passage is close to the end of Jesus’ earthly life. It is meant to stress the importance of hearing the words of Jesus in the little time left to his disciples. Mary realizes the crucial importance of that teaching moment but Martha is too distracted by meal preparation to understand the gift of his teaching that is being presented to her.

I, however, find myself responding not to theological understanding but to the very real humanity of these two sisters and I can see bits of myself in each of them. Can you? In Mary I see a desire for spiritual growth which is so powerful, that she can do nothing but sit at the feet of Jesus. It is that same desire that prompts people to come to

an early morning bible study or gather with a group discussing a spiritual book or video. It is that desire that prompts an individual to take a few minutes each day for meditation or reflection. It is that desire that prompts folks to come to Sunday worship in the middle of a heat wave, a blizzard or a Marathon. It is that desire that draws folks to taking The Upper Room home or seeking out one of the fine books in the church library to enhance spiritual growth.

In Martha I see both a driven sense of responsibility and a passionate need to be of service. That same sense draws the many volunteers in our church family into giving hours of service; like those who staff the Poss Shop, who attend committee meetings, who prepare the newsletters, who provide food early on Saturday mornings or drive around town delivering Meals on Wheels. In fact, this church and its programs are run by the grace of God and the sense of responsibility, if not passion, of all those dedicated volunteers. Where would we be without them? With the heat wave this summer, I have been particularly aware of JUMP volunteers working upstairs in the stifling heat. And those who have been gardening outside are my heroes.. Penny Reilly and Cyndy Hall have worked through rain and sun to produce the lovely landscape by the new doorway. Charlie Church is adding his sweat to the water as he coaxes up new grass. Bob Shattuck has taken care of the Memorial Garden on the hottest of days. Thanks to all of them for their dedication and their sweat. Thanks to all those who contribute their time and their energy to maintain the program life of this church family all year long.

“Mary has chosen the best part.” Who could argue with that statement? To sit at the foot of Jesus and absorb the power of his words would be an opportunity impossible to overlook. I have a favorite author, Marcus Borg whose theological and scriptural

insights are worth an overnight trip to New Hampshire for me. A few years ago when Neil and I heard that Borg was coming, we changed our schedules, signed up for his day and a half workshop, booked a motel room and went down to hear him. Granted, Borg is not Jesus Christ, but because of his writings, I experience Christ in a new way. So, I can understand the need for Mary to drop all her chores so that she could be present to Christ, for that moment.

This is the conundrum we all face in our own ways. We need to balance within our lives, our Martha busy-ness with our Mary reflectiveness, but most of us do not know how to do so. New grandmother that I am, I call my daughter several times each week to plead for yet one more picture but also to see how she is doing. One day she sounded frustrated that she is not getting more done around the house. I tried to ease that frustration by gently reminding her that the laundry will get done and the dishes will be washed but her most important role at this precious time is to wrap her son in love and care. In sitting and doing nothing but cuddling her baby, she is doing all that she needs to do for right now.

I would suggest that we all, including me, take that advice and apply it to ourselves. Most of us are very good at providing for the needs of others but how much do we care for ourselves. Jesus gently presented Martha with her own truth: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” When we have heavy responsibilities for others or are consumed by worries or by the seemingly endless list of jobs on our to do list, we live by the distraction of our cares in a shadowed half life. We have to begin to understand that we are not hard wired to live that way. Unlike the energizer bunny, our batteries wear down. In time, caring gives way to resentment.

Responsibility mutates into emotionless duty. Weariness and depression could easily become unwanted companions during those times. And there is always the possibility of falling through the trap of Martyr complex which, trust me, does not endear one to family, friends or colleagues..

The other side of the equation is self absorption. The Mary in us could stray from seeking reflective moments into a kind of narcissism as we tell ourselves that we cannot function without constantly feeding our spirits. If I can say that I am unable to respond fully to the needs around me without reflective time alone, that is God's Truth. But when I am unable to join a group doing the dishes after a meal because it is too noisy in the kitchen and I need to process the evening's experience, I am lying to myself and causing resentments among all those who are doing the messy work. Somewhere between Martyr and Narcissist lies faithful balance. There in that balance is the big picture.

With both logic and innate awareness of our needs, we should strive to do what we must to settle into that balance. If that means simply taking a few minutes several times in a day to breathe deeply and allow ourselves a moment of peace, make it happen. If it means a conscious meditation on the announcement made before any plane takes off: "Put the oxygen mask on yourself first..." do it! We can't be of help if we are worn down or sick. If we allow ourselves to realize that the world will not end if we have to take a day away from job stress, we will be doing ourselves and those who depend on us a greater favor than plodding through, making mistakes and taking out our annoyances on others. When all the stresses begin to take their toll, get some counseling. Short of that, my personal favorite is going to a movie that has no redeeming social value. Sit in the dark. Laugh. Feel better.

With God's guidance, step back and see more than the little portion of your life that causes both the joy and the pain within your being. Take a long look at the big picture. Note well all those intertwinings where you have touched another soul with laughter, support, wisdom, care, love. Perhaps you have done so through your work or your activity. Or perhaps you have done so through prayer. In quiet reflection and in active doing, each of us does makes a difference. As we touch other lives, we bless them with the hospitality of our care. And it really does take both a touch of Martha and of Mary to make us truly ourselves. Amen.