

Commentary to the Sixteen Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle C



The story is told of the father who after work would take a long walk with his teen-age daughter. He took great pleasure in her company. Suddenly she began to offer almost daily excuses as to why she could not accompany him. He was hurt but held his tongue. Finally his birthday arrived. His daughter presented him with a sweater that she had knitted. Then he realized that she had done her knitting when he was out of the house for his walk. He said to her, "Martha, Martha, I do appreciate this sweater. But I value your company infinitely more. A sweater I can buy in any store. But you I cannot buy. Please never abandon me again."

From the record, we can establish the Teacher stayed at the house of Martha and Mary in Bethany outside Jerusalem many times. He stayed there in the last three months of the year 29 when He was busily working the Jerusalem territory. He would stay in this house the first four days of Holy Week.

The sisters were not only generous hostesses but also bold ones. At this point, Jesus was walking about with a price on His head. He was an outlaw. His picture was in every post office. They hardly would find themselves in good favor with the police, the Temple authorities, and probably the Romans. Surely they were liberated women. They would have no need to join a feminist support group.

But I am certain that they were quite aware that the Master was running a risk Himself in being their guest. Accepting hospitality from women was clearly forbidden by Rabbinic law. In addition, He had from their first encounter taken great pains to offer them instruction. This would not make Him popular with the male world in general or with the authorities. The Christ was no doubt the only man in their circle who did not patronize them. He treated them as equals. What a welcome change that must have been for these intelligent women! They must have been so tired of being treated like children. No wonder Dorothy Sayers writes, "Perhaps it is no wonder that women were the first at the cradle and the last at the cross. They had never known a man like this Man..."

Do check out that Martha saluted the Teacher as "Lord" in verse 40 of today's Gospel. So, quite obviously these women realized they had a tiger by the tail. Walk carefully then. The Gospel is clearly talking about divinity.

We all know the story. Martha is exhausting herself putting together a meal worthy of a five star restaurant for the Lord. She is setting out the Irish linen, the Wedgewood china, the Tiffany silver, and the Steuben crystal. She has arranged a spray of anemones from her garden as a centerpiece. She is chilling the Dom Perignon champagne.

All this time of course her sister Mary is enjoying the company of their guest in the air-conditioned coolness of the family room. Martha is hardly amused. She storms into the room. There is Jesus with His worn sandals off and His feet up on the barca lounge. Mary is drinking in every word the Teacher speaks. She looks as though she wished she owned a Sony tape recorder. However, the Japanese had not yet reached Palestine. It is a pity for us that they had not.

Martha loses her cool and sounds off with a bitter indictment of Mary the shirker. For her pains, all she gets from the Christ is a wrap-around smile and a healthy chuckle. It does not improve her mood when she hears Him say in verses 42, "It is Mary who has chosen the better part."

Many of us have been seduced by what has been called the heresy of good works. We neglect Jesus' company. Our prayer life grinds to a screeching halt and goes off the boards. We disregard His invitation to come apart and rest awhile. We forget the sage who advises that if Christians do not come apart and rest awhile, they may just come apart. As the man says, if we are too busy to pray, we are too busy. After all, he goes on, God speaks only to those who take time to listen. We should reflect on Thomas Merton's line that "it is becoming increasingly evident that the only people in the world who

are happy are the ones who know how to pray."

And, as Joseph Donders observes, Mary knew Jesus needed company that day. He needed not a housekeeper but a listener.

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