

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Plenty of people find the moral of this gospel just wrong. Martha has a point. She has a dinner guest. She has chores to do. Mary avoids doing her share, and you get the feeling this is not the first time Martha complains about her sister. In any household, everybody has to pitch in. It wouldn't hurt Mary to lend a hand. Nor would it hurt Jesus to help: He just finished telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Instead, Saint Luke counterbalances that story about loving your neighbor with this one about loving God.

This story cautions against workaholism, a habit that arises in subtle ways. The tasks you do the best are probably the ones you repeat the most. Because you spent time on them in the past, you do them excellently and efficiently in the present. Such tasks bring a satisfying order to life. The danger is letting them become the ultimate purpose of the day, even when something unexpected should take priority. At times the good work we do, the very work that helps us self-identify, blinds us to opportunities for charity at our door. Especially in our culture, which values holding multiple jobs and spending long hours at work, the reaction against today's gospel is strong. Martha is in our USA DNA, and Mary demonstrates a different value when she sits at the feet of Jesus.

This past week racism has raised its head again in the United States. It surfaces in statements from leaders in public life, chanting crowds, and social media. We all deal with prejudice in some measure, not just between races, but even within races. We prejudge those who look different, speak another language, or hold opposing viewpoints. I'm just back from a couple weeks of vacation where I received hospitality from many people. For example, I spent a few days in Prague, where I know nothing about the local language. But people of the Czech Republic patiently listened to me in English and responded to my needs in English. In fact, when I first lugged my bulky suitcase from the train station up onto a city bus, a young man immediately offered me his seat - in English. I'm not sure I give such spontaneous hospitality to a foreign stranger, but this man did.

Today's gospel offers a message of deep hospitality. Even after we open the door to a guest, we may relapse into the lure of work rather than listen to the visitor's message. Sometimes our busyness— even when it concerns noble tasks — gets in the way of common charity. If like Martha we discover that our regular way of going through life is strangely making us “worried and anxious,” we may need to stop what we're doing in order to listen to the voice of God. That voice sometimes comes in the form of a stranger who has crossed the border of our home. St. Benedict wrote in his rule of life for monks, “Let all guests be received as Christ.” Each guest brings something that can enhance our life.

We can get so entranced by our routines of work and of opinions, that we don't see how uncharitable we can be. If you want to diminish prejudice in your life, one way is to spend time with people who are different. Opening the door is a good start, but then we can do more. Or rather, do less. Put aside for a bit the work of the day, sit down at the feet of the visitor, listen to someone else's point of view, and love God who made you and who made your neighbor.

Sunday, July 21, 2019