

REFLECTIONS FOR THE 16TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 17 July 2022
The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

The readings for today's Liturgy of the Word focus on hospitality – sacred hospitality, radical welcome. In the book of Genesis and in the Gospel of Luke, we see such radical hospitality with a depth of meaning that is not always immediately evident.



The story from Genesis speaks to a visit from the Lord to Abraham and Sarah. While we are told at the beginning of the story that the Lord appeared to Abraham, Abraham does not know that it is the Lord. Instead, he sees three strangers. He immediately offers them the best of hospitality – a warm welcome, a gracious bow, water to wash their feet, and a place to rest under the tree (the oaks of Mamre). He then directs Sarah to make bread for them and the servant to prepare the calf from his herd. He serves them this food with milk and curds. The three ask for Sarah – Abraham points to her in the tent. Then one of the three says that Abraham's wife Sarah will have a son. Regrettably, the story is not completed in today's reading. As the story continues in Genesis, Sarah laughs when she hears that she will have a son since she and Abraham are older, and she is past child-bearing age. We can only imagine that this was a laugh to cover deep pain and heartache. Then she and the Lord have a conversation about why she is laughing. God speaks to the woman as well as to the man when the promise, which will affect both of them, is made.

In the previous chapter, when God changes the names of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah as a sign of the covenant, God promises Abraham that Sarah will bear a son. Abraham laughs at the idea (Gen 17:17), probably with less pain than Sarah since he has already borne his son Ishmael. When Sarah's son is born, he is named Isaac, meaning "the one who laughs." After his birth, naming, and circumcision, we have a poignant reflection from Sarah which brings today's story to a new place, "Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' And she said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age'" (Gen 21:6-7). Abraham's and Sarah's radical and sacred hospitality have brought peace and hope, not only to them, but to the three religious communities that call them ancestors in faith: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.



The story taken today from Luke's Gospel illustrates another form of sacred hospitality with unintended outcomes. It tells the well-known story of Jesus and his disciples visiting the home of Martha and Mary. The traditional interpretation (and the one most used today) is that Martha is busily preparing the meal while Mary sits at Jesus' feet as a disciple who is learning from his wise teachings. Martha, preparing a meal for thirteen hungry men, asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her. Jesus scolds Martha, saying that she is worried and distracted by many things while Mary has chosen the better part. This interpretation is flawed. Let us look at five indications that tell us we need to read this story with contemplative eyes and to see something far more radical.

The first indication is in the opening verse. "Martha welcomes Jesus into her home" (Lk 10:38). This tells us that, despite the stereotype of women in Jesus' time, Martha is the leader of this household. Later, in the letters of Paul, we will meet other women who, as leaders of their



households, become leaders of the first house churches (remember Lydia in Acts 16:13-15, Mary of Jerusalem in Acts 12:12; Chloe of Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1:11, Nympha of Laodicea in Colossians 4:15, and Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2). Martha is certainly a forerunner for these women. The deference to Martha as leader of the house is reflected in Jesus' conversation with her. There is no suggestion that he has a conversation with Mary who "listened to what he was saying" but does not appear to respond. And when he speaks to Martha, he calls her by name twice, "Martha, Martha."

The next indication is found in the English interpretation of the original Greek text. The English interpretation (as do other modern interpretations) skews the meaning to emphasize the traditional interpretation. The phrase, "Martha was distracted" using the Greek word *περιεσπᾶτο* (or *periespato*), is better translated as "pulled in many directions." Anyone who has had to cook for thirteen men by herself, probably unexpectedly, would understand what that means! Our text leaves out the word "also" (Greek *καὶ* or *kai*) in the verse, "She had a sister named Mary, who also sat at the Lord's feet and listened to him" (Lk 10:39). It seems that both Mary and Martha were disciples of the Rabbi Jesus as were many other women who accompanied Jesus. The final mistranslation is perhaps the most telling. The word "tasks" by which Martha is pulled in many directions in Greek is *διακονίαν* (or *diakonian*). The verbal form of the same word is repeated in the phrase "do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself" (Lk 10:40). The Greek word used is "to serve," *διακονεῖν* (or *diakonein*). This is the root word for "deacon," used about the first seven deacons named by the apostles and used about Phoebe, the leader of the church in Cenchreae. Martha is ministering in the "tasks" that are pulling her in many directions. Her work is not frivolous or unimportant. She is a deacon who is engaged in mercying.

The third indication lies in the placement of this story in Luke, immediately after the story of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan begins with a contemplative gaze as we reflected when we did the reading last Sunday. That contemplative seeing leads to a heart overflowing with compassion, followed by mercying (actions to support the wounded man in his suffering), and by shaping circles of mercy with people and Earth. Jesus adds that we must go on to create a culture of mercy and compassion. Contemplation and action become integrated in response to suffering and pain.

This becomes the fourth indication – Jesus' way is the way of contemplation in action. This is shown over and over again in Jesus' ministering. He takes time apart for contemplation and prayer. He teaches the disciples and followers to take that time as well. But his heart overflows with compassion, and he heals. His parable outlined in Matthew 25 gives the same direction to all of us, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt 25:35-36). The psalmist today asks and answers the question, "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" (Ps 15), by connecting both contemplation and action.



Cookie cutter illustrating the lovely Shaker quote: *hands to work and hearts to God*

The founder of the Sisters of Mercy, Catherine McAuley, deliberately re-interprets the story of Martha and Mary found in Luke by using images from Matthew, "The functions of Martha should



be done for Him as well as the choir duties of Mary. . . He requires that we should be shining lamps giving light to all around us. How are we to do this if not by the manner we discharge the duties of Martha?" (Lk 10:38-42 and Matt 5:16). In this interpretation, she was faithful to a longstanding Christian tradition of the balance between contemplation and action, each one supporting and enlivening the other with the story of Martha and Mary becoming the image for finding this balance. One of Catherine's contemporaries, Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, a Moravian, shows that

Martha and Mary are imaging the God of creation in the six days of creation and the seventh day of rest, "The call of Martha and of Mary are both sanctified and both blest by Him, and as they primarily set Him forth, the one in His six days' labour, the other in His sabbatic rest, so do they equally express His goodness and mercy in the bountiful gifts which He affords, and in the farther gift of the talents, activities, and industry, useful to elicit their various and recondite value."

Our fifth indication is in our lived experience today. Two realities of the lives of women are reflected in this story of Martha and Mary. Martha, even though she is leader of her household, has to prepare the meal for the men by herself. That is the expectation of the society then and today. Women provide the majority of health care in the home and in health care facilities. Women are paid less than men for the same work or work of equal value. Women are most at risk for domestic abuse, for the outcomes of war, for the implications of COVID, and for the impact of climate change. Mary sits at the feet of the Rabbi as a disciple, but she listens only and does not speak. Women in our church are still not allowed to preach the homily at Mass. They are still underrepresented in theological faculty positions in universities around the world and in government leadership roles globally. To quote one spiritual teacher who echoes Jesus' words, "Justice to women is life in the presence of God: justice in the home, justice in the school, justice in the marketplace, justice in the business world, justice in the church. 'She shall not be deprived of it.'"

In our Congregation, we have become more centered on what we name as "engaged spirituality" or "reflected action" or "praxis" which brings together contemplation and action. We need both, and we need both to be integrated, one with the other. We must hold in prayer and reflection those who are suffering and at risk in our world, and we must act to reduce the suffering and risk. We must find time to enjoy the beauties of God's creation in a tree or a rainbow or a flowing stream, and we must find ways to mitigate climate change. We must grow in deeper awareness of integral ecology, and we must care for our common home. This is how we live the motto of our past Chapter, *Mercying: Imaging the Face of God in all Creation ~ Misericordiano: Siendo Imagen del Rostro de Dios en toda la Creación.*



In our personal lives, we will find that the balance shifts from time to time. When I was a younger woman, I was actively engaged in health care ministry at St. Clare's Mercy Hospital and then at the regional health authority. Today, many years later, I have been helping lead a truly contemplative endeavour which resulted in Health Accord NL, a new approach to improving health outcomes and health equity for the people of our province. When we are in suffering and pain,

when the energy to pray or to act is no longer there, our contemplation is deeply centered in trust in God's providence.

The story in Luke cannot and must not be read as a competition between women who engage in active ministry on the one hand and in quiet contemplation on the other, suggesting that Jesus believes that the latter is the better way. Our five indications show that such a reading is flawed and disrespectful to the Gospel teaching.

In early 2016, LCWR published *Avanti!*, a collection of reflections written by 30 LCWR members about responding to God who comes to us from the future and invites us to come forward. My reflection in that journal speaks to the weaving of contemplation and action into mercying through radical hospitality:

God, coming from the future, whispers to us that uncertain times and places cry out for radical inclusion. This God dares us to look closely at those whom we invite to our tables and at our relationships with guests who are strangers or strange, not looking like us, not sharing our values. This God dares us to listen with "the ears of our hearts" to the cries of a hungry child, an abused woman, a trafficked teenager, a tormented mentally ill man, a dying person, a lonely elder, a displaced family, fractured land, poisoned water, a wounded Earth. Inclusive welcoming will lead us to risk, cause us to challenge a social order which keeps people poor, and make us realize that we are not masters but guests of Earth. Our one certainty is rooted in this God's promise, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all . . . your young ones shall see visions, and your old ones shall dream dreams" (Joel 2:28/Acts 2:17).

Let us find our final words on the wonder of contemplation in action in the prophet Micah whose book Jesus would have read frequently, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8).

