

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” SIXTEENTH SUNDAY -C-
Genesis 18: 1-10 Psalm 15: 2-5 Colossians 1: 24-28 Luke 10: 38-42
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today’s gospel is in a section of Luke known as the “Journey Narrative” (9:51-19:28). We have had passages from this section since the thirteenth Sunday, when Luke first told us that Jesus “resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem” (9:51). Some of the stories in this section have Jesus literally on the road while in others we find him pausing in his travels; but the journey to Jerusalem is always the subtext to the story. In today’s passage he is off the road and the guest of two sisters Martha and Mary.

Some caution flags go up for me as I prepare this preaching. This is a familiar story and as we reflect on it and our congregation hears it proclaimed this weekend, conclusions will be rapidly drawn. Many of us have pre-fixed positions about the episode that we tend to fall back into rather quickly. Let’s try, as best we can, to hear this reading with fresh ears. So, for example, let’s not come crashing down on Martha and make her the excessively worrisome, fretful, over-worked person who doesn’t have time for the Lord. Everyone expects this message, and they might feel guilty when they hear it since, in our culture, most of us easily identify with Martha’s work ethic and concerns. But chances are there’s not a lot we can do about our busy, boxed-in lives. Is there anyway Martha can speak to us about being Christian in our busy worlds? We’ll want to do more in our preaching than make people feel guilty for working hard and worrying about the wellbeing of family and friends.

Imagine, for example, how a single parent or low-income couple might feel as they scramble to keep their families’ heads above financial waters. Upon hearing this gospel, they probably would love the “luxury,” so it would seem to them, of sitting in a contemplative place to listen to the Lord. We don’t want to exclude the hard workers from hearing good news in today’s story. Preachers might well treat Martha with a sympathetic ear, on behalf of women who work at home as well as those who work in the marketplace. They offer their lives in sacrifice for the benefit of their children and grandchildren. Some are widowed—was Martha? Recent statistics on wages show that women still don’t earn wages comparable to men in similar jobs. Besides their required daily labors, women often give time to

volunteer in church and to assist others in need. They are the “good Samaritans” who, like Mary and Martha, have listened to Jesus’ teachings and acted on them. So, as we prepare this preaching we might try to show the balance necessary to follow Jesus: we welcome Jesus, listen to his teachings that show where Christian service lies and we set about being the “neighbor” described in his parable.

A word about words: another English translation of this text says Martha “welcomes” Jesus into her home. Initially Jesus and Martha are the focus of the story. In fact, Mary doesn’t speak in this passage. Martha follows the Mideastern custom of extending hospitality to the traveler. We see a similar incident in the first reading as Abraham and Sarah offer welcome to the three strangers. Notice in the Genesis reading how Abraham “hastened” to tell Sarah to act “quickly” and how he “ran” to pick out a choice steer for a servant, who “quickly” prepared it. There’s lots of rush and fuss in the first reading for the sake of hospitality and Abraham is not chastised for rushing about: he was doing what was expected for a traveler. Martha is also following the custom of her ancestors in faith, who were told to welcome the stranger in their midst. Both stories have a common element of welcoming the Holy One who comes as friend or stranger. Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality is blessed, for God is fulfilling the promise to them that their descendants would become a great nation (Gen. 12:1-4).

By placing the Genesis and Luke accounts together the designers of the lectionary are offering the stories as parallels. We are being invited to look more deeply into these quaint sounding domestic stories. Abraham and Sarah will have the promised flesh and blood descendants—but their true descendants will be children in the spirit who trust in the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of the covenant, who will be with the people in their faith journey. So too with Mary and Martha, we are their descendants, we who also try to have open hearts and listening ears to the “guests” we welcome into our lives. Such guests are not always the usual people we find on guest lists, those of equal social and economic ranking to our own. Rather, we who hear week after week these selections from Luke’s gospel, are like Mary sitting beside the “Lord at his feet,” listening to his teaching so as to learn how to “welcome” the Lord into our lives.

Last Sunday we heard the teaching that immediately preceded today’s in Luke’s gospel—the tale of the neighbor in need (10:25-37). In that story we were, like Mary, listeners at Jesus’ feet and we learned about offering hospitality and neighborliness to the one in need. It is no accident that Luke places today’s

episode immediately after the Good Samaritan. He is telling us to “listen-up!” — Jesus has something life-giving to offer us. We too ask the lawyer’s question to Jesus, “Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25). By positioning the Mary and Martha story where he does, Luke is saying, in effect, “Welcome Jesus into your life, listen to his words about loving neighbor and you will learn the ways of eternal life.”

The lawyer’s response to Jesus’ question, “What is written in the law?” came in two parts, “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” The Good Samaritan parable answered the question about loving neighbor; today’s account addresses what loving God with our heart, being, strength and mind entails—attentiveness to the Lord’s word. Neither story is complete without the other. In the parable, the Samaritan “sees” the injured man; Mary is the one who “hears” Jesus. Remember that women were marginalized in the culture of the time, so were Samaritans. Two marginalized people, a Samaritan and a woman, are concrete examples of those previously extolled by Christ for hearing the word and doing it (8:21).

Jesus is referred to with the post-resurrection title “Lord”; a clue for the setting of this gospel. Using the title “Lord” for Jesus deliberately places this reading in the context of the early church. This is a story about welcoming and listening to the resurrected “Lord” in our midst. Also note the double use of the word “service” in verse 40 (“diakonia”), which refers to the church’s ministerial service. There was a debate about the roles of women in the early church. Possibly there was an issue of what constituted “women’s work” in the community—as in our own church today. In Luke’s time women performed many ministries, apostolic work, leadership, gospel proclamation, etc. (e.g. Rom 16: 1, 3-5; 16:6, 12; 1 Cor. 16:19; Phil 4: 3). But the epistles and readings like today’s show that there was a division over the roles of women. It seems some wanted women to stay in subservient roles and that may explain Jesus’ siding with Mary. Luke has portrayed, in this story at least, that the silent woman has the “better part.” Was he trying to promote women’s silence and passivity? I think the preacher may want to allude to the previously named important works women did so as to balance Luke’s silent and docile Mary. We should also remember that Mary was seated where only men were to be found, at the feet of a teacher. Jesus is not letting the mores and values of his day limit him or restrict those who might hear him and become his disciple.

Martha's roles of welcome and service are important works of the church as we welcome the Lord in the stranger and person in need. There were many gifts among women in the early church, some like Mary's were quiet disciples attentive to the words of Christ; others were very active. In their own ways, both Martha and Mary welcome Christ, each has apparently heard his teachings and shown love to God and service to neighbor.

The preacher would be wise, I think, to show how both men and women, with all their varied gifts, are called into service of others. All Christians are called to be listeners of the Word—something we do each time we gather in this liturgical assembly and listen to the proclamation of the Word. We are also called to service of our neighbor, which we do as we leave this listening place to return to our busy lives.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

THE WOMEN'S BIBLE COMMENTARY. Eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

Bible passages that raise gender issues are studied by noted women scholars. They take a serious look at these passages and highlight how they reflect women's experience. This book gives us a fresh look at what may be overly familiar passages and helps us see them from another perspective. Walter Brueggemann says of this book that there is no heavy-duty insistence here, just a fresh path to faithful biblical reading.

QUOTABLE:

The fluidity of actors in the scene is a narrative means of describing both the nearness and the mysterious elusiveness of God. Also expressive of majesty is the initial contrast between the dozing Abraham and the purposefully journeying men, and then Abraham's frantic preparations and their commanding silence; they speak only once but authoritatively (v.5b). The entire section is a superb example of Hebrew narrative art.

—from, THE NEW JEROME BIBLICAL COMMENTARY'S notes on today's Genesis passage.

JUSTICE NOTES

After September 11, how can we build not only a safer world, but a better world? More just, more secure, more peaceful, more respectful of human life and dignity?

How will we protect the weakest in our midst--innocent unborn children? How will our nation resist what Pope John Paul II calls a "culture of death"? How can we keep our nation from turning to violence to solve some of its most difficult problems--abortion to deal with difficult pregnancies; the death penalty to combat crime; euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of age, illness, and disability; and war to address international disputes?

How will we address the tragic fact that more than 30,000 children die every day as a result of hunger, international debt, and lack of development around the world, as well as the fact that the younger you are, the more likely you are to be poor here in the richest nation on Earth?

How can our nation help parents raise their children with respect for life, sound moral values, a sense of hope, and an ethic of stewardship and responsibility? How can our society defend the central institution of marriage and better support families in their moral roles and responsibilities, offering them real choices and financial resources to obtain quality education and decent housing?

How will we address the growing number of families and individuals without affordable and accessible health care? How can health care better protect human life and respect human dignity?

How will our society combat continuing prejudice, overcome hostility toward immigrants and refugees, and heal the wounds of racism, religious bigotry, and other forms of discrimination?

How will our nation pursue the values of justice and peace in a world where injustice is common, desperate poverty widespread, and peace is too often overwhelmed by violence?

What are the responsibilities and limitations of families, community organizations, markets, and government? How can these elements of society work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good, care for creation, and overcome injustice?

When should our nation use, or avoid the use of, military force--for what purpose, under what authority, and at what human cost?

How can we join with other nations to lead the world to greater respect for human

life and dignity, religious freedom and democracy, economic justice, and care for God's creation?

We hope these questions and the 2004 campaigns can lead to less cynicism and more participation, less partisanship, and more civil dialogue on fundamental issues.

-----“Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility” ---US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Wade L. Cole #0082151 (On death row since 6/14/94)

Kenneth L. Boyd #0040519 (7/14/94)

Marcus Robinson #0348505 (8/5/94)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606