

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 16<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-**

Genesis 18: 1-10 Psalm 15: 2-5 Colossians 1: 24-28 Luke 10: 38-42

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

I know we have traditionally rooted for Mary in today’s gospel story, after all she does seem to win the accolade for being a good disciple. But all I can say is, “Thank God for Martha!” Mary sits up close to Jesus, at his feet, to listen to him speak. Luke paints a lovely scene here; it is so tranquil. In fact, it is such a lovely picture that artists have turned to it for inspiration. What could be more suitable for a religious painting than a female disciple attentive to Jesus? How would you paint the picture, or pose the models for a photograph?

Mary would be leaning forward a bit, eyes focused on Jesus—“all ears” as we say. He would look regal, garments fresh and wrinkle free. He is seated, but leaning forward, finger pointed heavenward as he makes an important point. You can almost hear his voice—calm, clear and certain. She would not miss a word; he would repeat and clarify, if she did. He doesn’t want her to have any doubts or ambiguities about what he is teaching. As you set this scene it would look spic and span, not a thing out of place. By the way, arrange a shaft of light coming through the window to shine on them. Through the window the viewer would catch a glimpse of sky—it’s a perfect day, not a cloud.

Is that the way the story sounds to you? Have you seen those paintings of it? All light and harmony. Perfect clarity for the listening disciple. Does that sound like our lives? I didn’t think so; it doesn’t sound like mine. I struggle to be attentive to Jesus’ words. The scene sounds like it should take place in a monastery somewhere, on a distant hilltop. Maybe some nun or monk is perfectly attuned to God’s word and is getting it right in a distant monastery on a cloudless day. Actually, from what I have heard from nuns and monks, it doesn’t resemble their lives either. Turns out, none of us has a perfectly calm listening post to which we can go to tune into Jesus and learn exactly what we are to do about the important decisions we must make. Are we just out of luck, with no chance to ever focus and hear Jesus’ words to us?

I don’t think so, Luke isn’t writing for a select group of pure contemplatives. In fact, he doesn’t let this moment last more than a couple of verses. Reality

intrudes in the voice of Martha. That's why I say, "Thank God for Martha." I think most of the people in our congregation will say the same thing when they hear her speak up. Actually, they will already know the details, and they will be anticipating her entrance. I began a homily on this passage once by saying, "If my mother could rip out one story from the bible and throw it away, this would be the one." And the congregation burst in with applause. It's wasn't their favorite either.

"Lord, don't you care...," Martha protests, as she points to her predicament. Remember that this story began with Martha's welcoming Jesus—as we have welcomed Jesus into our lives. But after the welcome comes the follow-up. There is work to be done, it can be burdensome for us, and we can feel as if we are all alone trying to do it. Not just us individuals either, for there are certainly enough struggling parishes whose community of believers might be tempted to air the same complaint, "Lord, don't you care?"

We preachers will want to be careful how we portray these two sisters, these two sides of discipleship. Women will be uncomfortable, men should be too, if the story sounds like two bickering women—two bickering sisters. Martha is often depicted as the loser in this story, someone who has her priorities confused, someone who is just fussing around the house. But Luke gives us a clue that more is at stake here. This is a story for all Christians, and both sides of the tale pertain to us. The word Luke uses to describe Martha's being burdened with much "serving," is "diakonia." It is a clue that her concern isn't just about housework, but more about church work. There is much the one who welcomes Jesus into her life must do.

Another note: this one is mentioned by women biblical commentators (cf. THE WOMEN'S BIBLE COMMENTARY). One interpretation of Mary has been that she is depicted in the traditional disciple's place of listening to the Lord. But some scholars suggest that Luke may not have been exalting her position. They note that Mary has a purely passive role in the story, she is a listener. She is not described as male disciples have been, for the men are often depicted in dialogue with Jesus (5: 1-11, 8: 4-15, 9: 10-11). Martha's active role is also less than the ideal, for she is shown performing diakonia," an important activity in the church, but she does so with anxiety and worry. Both these women are disciples, they just don't portray the fullness of discipleship, they need more. In

that, we can all identify with them.

I notice the context of this passage: it follows immediately upon last Sunday's Good Samaritan parable. By the context, is Luke suggesting that the disciple who sits at Jesus' feet and pays attention to his words, will hear the unique teaching to love that is contained in the parable? If we do not listen, we will not know how to be a disciple; we will go off thinking we do--- and we will make all kinds of mistakes. Listening and diakonia are both necessary. We need both in our lives, if we are to be faithful disciples. The Buddhists say something like, "After enlightenment, the dishes." Even the most contemplative ones in the monastery have to plant, wash the floor, love one another and feed the hungry who knock at the monastery door.

While disciples of Jesus are both listeners and doers of the word, I can't avoid the nudge this story gives me. For it is not the contemplative or listening side of discipleship that is danger of taking over my life. If I acknowledge both Martha and Mary as aspects of my life--- it is the Mary that needs tending. This passage sounds in me as I sit in a crowded airport lounge; do my house cleaning; shop for groceries; prepare preachings; respond to the needy; tend to family needs, etc. The story calls me to nurture the "listening place" in my life. I have to ask myself, short of going off to an ashram, what can I do to foster my inner listening?

James Finley has written and given retreats on the contemplative life for the everyday person. (THE CONTEMPLATIVE HEART, Notre Dame: Sorini Books, 2000). He encourages us "to learn to awaken to the divinity of the ground beneath our feet....to begin to sense, however obscurely, that the great way is none other than the God-given boundlessness of the sheer immediacy of now." (p. 26) He says this "awakening" to the divinity of the present moment is a grace we need for we have the seeds of forgetfulness in us. We can "forget" that our day is charged with an openness to the divine. "The sun came up this morning. Now there is a grace. Where would the day be without it? But did we pause, even for an instant to behold the rising sun's truly precious nature?" (p. 27). He encourages us to spend this day awake, in "grateful groundedness."

How do we stay "awake" to the divine in our lives? How do we keep ourselves from "forgetting?" How do we "sit at Jesus' feet listening to Jesus' teaching" while the "real world" of Martha's voice keeps reminding us of all there is to do

in our service to the Lord? Here's the preacher's task: to suggest ways, simple daily practices, that busy people and a serving church, can practice to keep awake to Christ's daily utterances to us. We preachers are just as busy as anyone in the congregation. It's hoped that in our busy lives we have worked out some daily practice of listening that we can share with the congregation. In the East, the question might be, "Tell me about your practice." For Christians we might ask, "What do you do each day to sustain an awakened state within you? What regular pattern do you have to help you keep attuned to Jesus' words?"

The preacher may also want to draw on his or her knowledge of what busy people have told us about their spiritual practice. For example. I had a very busy aunt who owned her own business. She kept a paperback bible on her car seat and after her commute to the office she would pause before getting out of her car to read a Gospel passage. She would use that for her day's focus at work. Another person recites the "Jesus Prayer" throughout the day ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner."). Some take a quiet break at lunch time to sit alone to read scripture or just to be quiet. A busy mother gets up ½ hour earlier each day and while the house is still quiet, sits by a window, sips tea and enjoys the quiet. (Be careful suggesting this though, most parents, especially working mothers, are sleep deprived already!) Others look ahead at the upcoming Sunday scriptures and read them at spare moments throughout the week. (There's an excellent handy monthly paperback of these readings called, "Living With Christ" published by Novalis. \$18.98/year. 1-800-387-7164) Someone else reports that after she finishes a task, either during the day or at key moments of her life, she pauses and says, "What next?" and she listens for an answer. "Speak Lord, your servant is listening," seems to sum up all of the above practices of sitting at the feet of Jesus with Mary as we pause from the daily and important work of Martha.

Remember that in this section of Luke, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. We know what trials he will face there. On the journey he is welcomed into Martha's home and there she prepared food for him on his journey. The roles are shifted for us today, in the midst of our journey as disciples we have been welcomed to the table of the Lord. Here we are nourished by first sitting at his feet to hear his word and then we are fed with the food that gives us his life. We need both forms of nourishment today. We can put our anxieties aside for the

moment, for what we most need will be addressed. At this banquet, his word will help us realize that we will not have to journey the sometimes-arduous road to Jerusalem on our own. Whatever the current cost of being his disciple, he will not leave us undernourished and weary. As we heard in last week's Good Samaritan, he will come over to us, tend our wounds and take us to this inn, this gathering place, of his rest. Here his words encourage us, here we can be less "anxious and worried" about how we will continue to serve and grow in discipleship.

### **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**

The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of

the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God but is the expression of God's creative work and the meaning of Christ's redemptive ministry.

----- The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response. U.S. Bishops, 1983