



July 17, 2022 – The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

*Blessed Martha*

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Poor Martha. To be reprimanded by Jesus as not having done as well as Mary, her younger sister—she who is the mistress of her house—she, it is likely, who gives the orders ~ to Mary and everyone else in the household. And is obeyed. But not this time: Jesus entered the house and, as the Greek makes clear, Mary didn't hesitate, she no doubt didn't ask permission of her elder sister, she just went and sat at Jesus's feet, in the midst of the—probably all male—disciples and gave all her attention to what Jesus was saying, while ignoring what—it is likely—Martha was saying, about helping her get everything prepared, to fulfill the sacred duty of Hospitality . Mary was claiming the privilege or status of a disciple, one which ~ it seems ~Jesus gladly gave her; which is to be waited on, to receive hospitality not extend it.

Poor Martha.

Jesus is in Martha's house; he has sat down to teach, and Mary sits at his feet, a willing disciple. Martha, which in Greek means “mistress”, the female version of the “master” of the house, is beset by many cares; today, specifically, she has the responsibility of hospitality, to fulfill in terms of food and drink. And Mary, her sister, whom she expected to help, isn't.

So let's suppose they're usually equally hospitable—a team—equally ready to work to properly welcome their guests in the ongoing tradition of Middle Eastern hospitality, represented in Scripture by Abraham's hospitality to God's messengers, the three angels, who are also God herself.

But this time Mary did not join in with Martha to get food and drink prepared and served.

Let's assume that Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus became friends with Jesus before he began his formal ministry—he knew them well enough to drop in. But this time, he is no longer the Jesus they have known; he has performed miracles and given teachings that have amazed the learned and angered the powers that be; he has collected followers and attracted crowds ~He is no longer only Jesus, the carpenter's son. But only Mary was ready to recognize his changed identity directly and simply and fall at his feet. Martha didn't and kept her recognition of his new status on a material plane. “He's famous now: the way I can show I appreciate it is to make our hospitality even more munificent.”

Martha's hospitality to Jesus has not led her to worship and discipleship; it has led her away from it. Is Hospitality to be scorned, therefore? Not so! By no means! It is a sacred concept.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel are taught to be charitable to travelers and treat them like guests to demonstrate faithfulness to God: he expects it of his covenant people and to fail to is to risk judgment (see Job 31:3 and Isaiah 58:7).

In the New Testament, God's expectations of hospitality towards travelers that treats them like guests continue, with the addition of a “special responsibility: towards “servants of God” such as Jesus and his disciples who depended upon it in their peripatetic way of life. Indeed, in the instances of Jesus sending



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out of the twelve, the 70 and the 72, to preach the Kingdom, “giving or refusing of hospitality [by those he sent them to] indicates acceptance or rejections of the gospel” (See Mk 10:9, Luke 10:4). In Matt 25 it tips the scale for or against in the Last Judgment. And Jesus elevated hospitality by making it an instance of “divine generosity.” The lavish wedding banquets and dinners were given by the king, or God, in his stories; the banquet table of the Lamb in Revelation; the last Supper itself where Jesus is host and servant, washing the feet of his disciples and giving them the Eucharist, the food and drink of unending life in him. Jesus served his disciples as a servant host, and that anticipates his self-sacrifice on the cross for all of us: “For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45)

Hospitality is no small thing but when the guest is God hospitality in the usual human sense needs to be left behind, like the husk when the kernel is revealed.

So, does Jesus love Mary more than Martha because she grasps straight away who he is? Absolutely not.

He calls the elder sister “Martha, Martha” – the repetition of a name is a sign of deep emotion—recall Jerusalem, Jerusalem, his mode of address to the holy city; or Simon, Simon to Simon Peter, elsewhere in Luke —which makes clear to her and to us how much regard he has for her—that he loves Martha exactly as much as he loves Mary and therefore he longs for her too to recognize him for who he is—not the gardener but the Lord—and invites her to become a guest of his, taking her place by Mary’s side as his disciple. Let him be the host and feed her to the “better portion” that will never be taken away. The “better portion” or “the good portion” is “the right meal” or the Word of God (see Luke 4:4 and Duet 8:3). Because it is not literal food, it cannot be taken away. In addition, Mary’s choice means she is “ready to be taught” (see Ps. 119:57-64.). “The Lord is my portion; I promise to keep your words...I turn my feet to your decrees, I hurry and do not delay to keep your commandments... I do not forget your law...teach me your statutes.” Response to God’s word is a key to discipleship and “more life” now and stretching out to eternity. “Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!” “Blessed ...are those hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:27). Like Mary, Martha too, will be blessed. She need only put aside her consuming overconcern for the world.

“The worries of the world should never prevent one from consuming God’s word. Sit at his feet and devour his teaching for there is no more important meal” (Bock, D., Luke).

What does this all mean for you and me? It is not commonplace that Martha is too busy and distracted and bossy to be admirable: “Don’t be such a Martha” is often heard.

I think God wants us to be both; it is not a question of either or but both and. And the “us” is men as well as women, adolescents as well as graybeards.

Martha is us in the world and a good example of how we should be: she is hardworking, conscientious, doing the necessary things, honestly and with goodwill, to survive and flourish and help others survive



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and flourish in this broken world; and Mary needs to be another part of us: we need to find, time and space, to sit at the feet of God, to talk with him and to listen to what he is saying, to experience his presence, to step outside the limits of this world in prayer, only to return to it, refreshed, renewed and redirected, a Martha, who now knows who Jesus is!

Here is a prayer for us, as we seek to live our lives as both Martha and Mary in this world but not of it:

“Show me Lord, in a tangible way, that you are there and that you care. I need to know in my body, tangibly, in my thoughts and feelings, and in my spirit sweetened by your presence, that you love me unconditionally, and that you will see me through everything, that you are truly there and that you truly care. And then I can go back down to the plain “where ignorant armies class by night” to unflinchingly proclaim your good news in word and deed, with hope in my heart, and faith in you as my shield. Amen.”