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Scripture tells of plenty of conflicts between brothers. It began with Cain and Abel and then seemed to be a generational curse with Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau and finally the colorful eleven-to-one saga of Joseph and his brothers. Moses and Aaron apparently got along, but in the Christian Scriptures we hear that even Jesus' own family thought he had lost his mind (Mark 3:21). Luke, who strives to give women equal billing, is the only evangelist to show us Martha and Mary's domestic struggles.

Most representations of the sisters depict Martha as offering food, while Mary remains intent on Jesus' presence and word. Some artists depict only the three main characters; others include Lazarus or a multitude of guests in the scene. One contemporary pen and ink depiction by Maria Laughlin shows Martha and Mary facing Jesus, whom we do not see. Martha is standing behind Mary holding high a tray with a loaf and a pitcher, while Mary sits in front of her with her eyes downcast, holding a book. Martha's eyes are wide-open and challenging, almost to the point of saying, "Go ahead, dare me. I'll drop it all on her head!"

Claudio Pasto, a Brazilian artist, created a unique icon of Mary, Martha, Jesus and Lazarus, in which Jesus is seated in the middle with his left arm around Lazarus. Martha stands by Jesus' right hand, which is raised in blessing, and Mary is seated on the ground at the feet of the other three. All four are clothed in white, and the three siblings are looking at Jesus. Martha's face expresses the most tenderness as she holds out a bowl of steaming food for the rest. Martha's feet, like Jesus', seem poised for movement, while Lazarus is standing steady and Mary is seated, giving no indication that she will move anything other than her head.

In Pasto's icon, Martha's stance and the movements of her hands make her appear most like Jesus. That, of course, goes counter to the majority of interpretations that take Jesus' reply to Martha as a call to pay more attention to contemplation than to the menu, table and stove.

Artistic depictions are meditations on a subject. Like the kind of contemplation Ignatius of Loyola taught his friends, they invite us into the story so that we can become part of the interaction with Jesus and the others.

The most obvious question we might ask Jesus about this incident is why he criticized Martha's concern for service just after he told the parable about the generous Samaritan — in contrast to the priest and Levite who concentrated on anything but the physical needs of another. The traditional response suggests that Jesus was indicating the superiority of the contemplative life over the active, but he did not say that and his life itself didn't give witness to it.

Jesus lived a very active life — moving from town to town, being a thorn in the side to Pharisees, eating with anyone who invited him and often saying provocative things while at table. Matthew, Mark and Luke also portray him escaping to pray alone. But even when he tried to escape for time with the disciples, he abandoned their retreat time to respond to the crowds that sought them out. How does his lifestyle help us understand his conversation with Martha?

Martha wanted Jesus to tell her sister to get to work, but Jesus says nothing to Mary. Instead, he notes how harried Martha is. She had taken the bold step of inviting Jesus into her home (no mention of a chaperoning brother in this story), and she was concerned to fulfill what Jesus expected of those who received missionaries — to give him a place to stay and something to eat.

When Jesus sent his disciples out on mission, he told them to share their peace, to stay with anyone who received them, and to eat whatever was served. Martha invited Jesus, but quickly became “burdened with much serving.” The one thing she lacked was the psychic space to receive his peace — and that’s what tranquil Mary seemed to be soaking up at his feet.

Jesus had accepted Martha’s invitation, and it seemed that what he wanted in a meal from her was real presence, the one thing she was too busy to give. Faith tells us that Christ is present to us in word and sacrament. Today’s Gospel reminds us that Christ’s presence means little if we stay too busy to soak it in. We too are called to real presence — in our prayer and with everyone we meet.

## **GENESIS 18:1-10a**

The author of this selection from Genesis wants us to sit back and enjoy this story without worrying about details that don’t match or theological concepts that developed centuries later. For now, all we need to do is listen to a story about God’s interaction with Abraham. Of course, God’s relationship with Abraham automatically brings Sarah into the picture.

As the story opens, Abraham is seated “by the terebinth of Mamre.” A terebinth is a tree like an oak. Mamre seems to refer to a region that may have been named for a chieftain friendly to Abraham. So, here we have Abraham sitting in the shade at the entrance to his tent — the best place to be on a hot desert afternoon. Suddenly, three strangers appeared. Since Abraham’s tent had no door, standing in the open functioned as the equivalent of knocking.

A paragon of hospitality, Abraham rushed up to them, bowed as low as an old man could, and asked if they would honor him by refreshing themselves and staying for a little food. Abraham immediately got the elderly Sarah working to fulfill his offer of hospitality. He told her they needed a bushel (40-60 pounds) of flour to prepare some rolls; he sent servants to slaughter a steer (500 pounds or more) so they could prepare a little meat.

Cooking a feast of those proportions gave Abraham and the visitors plenty of time to get to know one another. That would become obvious both in their promise to him and Abraham’s later bargaining session with their leader. After resting and eating, the visitors repaid the couples’ generosity by promising that Sarah would bear a son, satisfying the one desire the couple had always felt but had never been able to fulfill.

Unfortunately, the Lectionary skips over the details of Sarah’s story (Genesis 18:10b-15). Those verses go on to explain that while the men visited, Sarah was sitting inside the tent where she could hear everything. Perhaps the visitors had not yet seen her, but the promise of her pregnancy sent her into a fit of laughter that caught their attention.

This little scene offers a commentary on faith. Sarah represents humanity who, upon hearing God’s ridiculous promises, laughs out loud. The laughter is not mocking, but incredulous; God’s promises are beyond human expectations and potential. When Sarah denies having giggled, the spokesman doesn’t take her to task, but simply assures the couple that nothing is too marvelous for the Lord to do. When we hear this reading in conjunction with today’s Gospel, the combination invites us to reflect on hospitality, on generosity, on faith, and on the fact that God will never be outdone in bestowing lavish love.

## **PSALMS 15: 2-3, 3-4, 5**

In *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary*, Benedictine sister Irene Nowell explains that Psalm 15 is an entrance liturgy, outlining what is required of worshippers entering the sanctuary. It sounds like the inverse of the penitential rite in the eucharistic celebration. In the end, they are both calls to integrity on the part of people who wish to participate in communal prayer.

When we hear that those who do “justice” live in the presence of the Lord, one mindset can lead us to think legalistically and remind us of laws, minimum requirements, etc. In the Hebrew worldview, justice, or righteousness, focuses on

relationships. The law may or may not be applicable in a given situation. The key question is: What is life-giving in these particular circumstances?

The psalm verses we pray today give concrete examples of righteousness. First of all, people who are just keep their hearts set on the truth. That demands discernment, and discernment calls each of us to question how our ego may be skewing our truth-seeking.

The interplay of ideas in the second stanza calls for careful consideration. The first phrase is easy enough, as it says that the just do not take up a reproach against a neighbor. The second, translated for us as, “by whom the reprobate is despised,” is a little more difficult to square with being signs of God’s love. The New Revised Standard Version translates it as, “in whose eyes the wicked are despised.” This translation offers a little more room for rejecting wickedness without writing off the perpetrator.

The verses that speak against collecting interest and bribery are fair warnings about any number of activities that value material goods or gain over the well-being of another human being. Those ideas lead us back to the beginning: To act justly is to create life-giving relationships. Those who seek to live that way will know God. Those who do not are avoiding God’s presence and influence.

## **COLOSSIANS 1:24-28**

This selection is open to misinterpretation, centering on the idea that Paul expresses by saying, “in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” That sounds as if Paul, or whoever wrote in his name, is saying that Christ’s sacrifice left something undone. Because that is the diametric opposite of Paul’s basic theology, it must mean something else.

Questions about this passage touch the same nerve as questions about why Christians suffer and when the end will come. They lead into the heart of the mystery often referred to as the “already but not yet.” What happened in Christ tells the whole story, but it has yet to permeate all of history, and thus the entire mystery of Christ’s life, death and resurrection continues to be active in history.

When Paul says, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake,” he wants the Colossians to understand that nothing he must go through compares to his joy and fulfillment in bringing the Gospel to them. Paul has no qualms about admitting what Jesus told his disciples — if the Christ must suffer, his followers can expect to follow suit.

This is a particularly poignant message because Paul is writing from prison. We don’t know the extent of his sufferings there, but what we know of him assures us that being immobilized and prevented from traveling and preaching would have caused Paul great anguish. However, Paul is not looking for sympathy. Rather, he uses his own suffering as a sign that faith in Christ is no free ride to glory; it promises a share in his passion. Most of all, Paul believes that suffering, his for their sake and theirs for the sake of others, participates in the good that Christ’s suffering brings to humankind.

## **LUKE 10:38-42**

The story of Martha and Mary has been interpreted in very diverse ways. For some, it confirms that women belong in the kitchen or in quiet contemplation. That is part of the old hierarchical model that puts pope, bishops and priests at the top; contemplative women next; religious brothers and sisters after them. Then, if we bother to mention them, come the laity. For others, the Martha and Mary story demonstrates Jesus’ acceptance and promotion of women far beyond what his culture permitted.

In its context in Luke’s Gospel, this incident takes place shortly after Jesus decided to set his face for Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), when he deliberately began the journey that would lead to the culmination of his mission. By the time Jesus got to Martha’s village, he had been refused hospitality in a Samaritan village, taught about the demands of discipleship, sent out the 72 missionaries and received them back, and most recently had the encounter which led to the parable of the generous Samaritan. Now, Jesus enters a village where Martha receives him and gives him a missionary’s welcome in her home.

According to Jesus' instructions to missionaries, when someone received them, they were to share their peace, accept the hospitality, and stay with their hosts until it was time to leave the village. So far, that seems to be what happened in Martha's home.

Then, the action of this incident moves inside the house, often a symbol for the community or church. Now, things do not go smoothly. Luke doesn't highlight Jesus' countercultural decision to enter the home of two women to whom he was not related, which was taboo in his culture. A man could go into another man's house without question, but since there is no mention of anyone else in the home, Jesus apparently accepted Martha's invitation as if it had come from a male. Then Martha's sister Mary took up the posture of a student/disciple, sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his teaching. At this point Luke has depicted Jesus as interacting with two women who act as if they don't know their place, and he seems to think nothing of it.

The tension of this story has nothing to do with the women's failure to play their prescribed social roles. The problem is that Martha feels overburdened with her serving — in Greek, her diakoneo. When she turns to Jesus, he tells her she is too worried about "many things." Martha is the first disciple Jesus advises not to worry; later he will say the same to those who risk arrest because of him (Luke 12:11). He also advises his disciples to avoid worry about their life, their food or clothes, because such worry can't add a minute to their lives (Luke 12:22-30). Instead of the many things Martha is concerned about, Jesus says there is only one thing necessary, and Mary has chosen a good that he will not take away from her.

If this story had been remembered during a liturgy in a house church of Luke's day, the participants would quickly compare it to the incident recorded in Acts 6, when problems about the distribution of food led the Twelve to say, "It is not right that we neglect the word of God to serve at table" (Acts 6:2). Their solution was to name deacons, disciples like Martha, who would make certain that everyone was fed.

The tension portrayed in this story has not disappeared. Some disciples strive to attend to all the details — the hungry need food and the refugees need shelter. At the same time, the tasks of diakonia, the constant commitment to respond to the needs of others, can become so burdensome that we lose touch with Christ and the Gospel for whom we started it all.

There is no single correct interpretation of the story of Martha and Mary. It seems that Luke sandwiched it between the story of the generous Samaritan and Jesus' teaching on prayer to indicate that the tension itself is important. Martha and Mary both chose the good, but there can be too much of a good thing. Christian disciples must continually seek the balance.

## **Planning: 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

It's mid-summer and prime vacation time. Some of you may be sitting in your tent like Abraham, or campers may be joining you for worship this weekend. Some may be on a longer journey, just stopping on their travels to worship with you.

In ancient times, hospitality was a primary virtue, and this incident with Abraham and Sarah stands as a prime lesson for succeeding generations, including our own. The Letter to the Hebrews says, "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels." Some suggest the three men who appear to Abraham might be angels or even the Trinity, but in any case, one of them is identified as the Lord.

We often think of our responsibility to welcome the stranger, but we might also remember that strangers often bring gifts to us. Visitors increase the size of our assembly and may even increase the collection! But they also bring us gifts just by being themselves and sharing a bit of their lives with us. Some newcomers might not be travelers but people looking for a church home, and they have gifts to share with us on an ongoing basis if they are welcomed.

The same point applies to our attitudes toward immigrants. A view that sees immigrants as only a problem or a burden or a threat is simply false. Immigrants have enriched the United States and other countries in countless ways in every generation. Sure, there are a few bad actors in any group, but crime by immigrants is less frequent than crime perpetrated by longtime residents. Immigrants bring personal gifts and the gifts of their differing cultures. They keep society vibrant and creative. In most developed countries, immigrants are essential to the future, as birth rates no longer sustain current populations. We need workers and we need new citizens. Hospitality applies not just to church on Sunday but to our neighborhoods and cities, as well as to our regions, states and countries. Fearmongering and hatred should have no place among those who claim to follow Christ.

So how can parish leaders counteract the fearmongering that is increasingly shaping countries and the world? Preachers must reject timidity and preach God's word fully. If our faith does not shape the way we treat other people, both personally and communally, then our faith is dead. We cannot stand by and let the forces of hatred have free reign.

Planners, too, must be willing to challenge people to embrace the word of God, even when that may bring opposition. When people are scared, they often react in unchristian ways. Leaders need to show them a better way and nurture a more honest and loving vision. Let the preaching and songs and prayers today guide people to a rich and deep hospitality toward all God's people and all God's creatures!

## Prayers: 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

### Introduction

God's presence is at the heart of our faith and our life as Christians, and today's readings describe others' responses to this presence. Openness to unexpected people or events and a willingness to believe are required for us to be changed by our experience. We might listen, wonder, serve, celebrate or share this with others. What really matters is believing that God *will* enter our lives — and that we will never be the same.

### Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were a living sign of God's presence to those open to you: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you call us to be open to that presence, however it may come: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you give us the freedom to respond in our own unique ways: Lord, have mercy.

### Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** We pray now for the world, the church and for all to whom God is present.

**Minister** For the church; for the courage to be a sign of God's healing presence even in the midst of divisive issues we need to address; for our pope, our bishop and all responsible for decision-making, we pray:

- For eyes and ears open to the possibility of God's presence in people, places or situations that seem mundane or profane; for hopeful, expectant hearts, we pray:
- For hope when we are in pain or when we question if we are worthy of God's love; and for the sensitivity to encourage others who doubt that God exists, we pray:
- For those who deny God's presence in other religious traditions or make false claims to speak on God's behalf, and those who seek to destroy peoples' faith, we pray:
- For those who point to divine presence through the arts, science or other secular endeavors; and for those who do not profess religious faith but are just and compassionate toward others, we pray:
- For the sick and suffering of this community who look to us and our ministries for signs of God's loving, healing presence, we pray:

**Presider** Ever-present God, help us be open to your presence even when we are doubtful or discouraged. May we remember you choose to use us as instruments of your presence whether or not we feel worthy. Make us grateful witnesses of your redemptive presence to the world. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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