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Become a friend of Jesus, and Jesus will fill you with blessings

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Whenever I read this Gospel, I like to ask people, "Don't you think Martha got kind of a bad rap from Jesus?" Mary was just sitting around and Martha was doing all the work, but it's much deeper than that. We have to spend some time now to listen to these Scripture lessons and draw lessons for ourselves, and there are three things in today's lessons that are very important.

One is that they're about hospitality -- both Abraham and Sarah and then Martha and Mary show great hospitality. They're reaching out to welcome someone into their midst. They're also about discipleship, something that we're all called to. Finally they're about, I think, the humanness of Jesus and how he can be a friend, which is very important for all of us to realize and to experience.

Now hospitality -- I think we all understand clearly what that means. You reach out to welcome guests and visitors, strangers even, into your midst and you share with them what you have. Abraham and Sarah were doing as these three strangers just came along. Abraham went out to meet them, then he goes back and tells Sarah, "We have to get a luncheon ready for them, rest in the shade of the tree."

This story -- if we're going to understand the deepest meaning of it, we have to go back further in the Book of Genesis, where, in Chapter 12, the very beginning of the story of Abraham and Sarah, God calls Abraham. The writer tells us, God said to Abraham, "Leave your country, your family, your father and mother's house for the land I will show you, and I will bless you to become a great nation." That promise is given to Abraham and, with total trust in God, he leaves everything and he departs with his family and goes toward the land where God has called him to be.

Then in the 15th chapter of Genesis, we read this: "Abraham said, 'My Lord God, what happened to your promises? I am still childless and all I have will go to Eliezer of Damascus. You have given me no children, so a slave of mine will be my heir.' " Then God, who has spoken to Abraham, said, "Eliezer will not be your heir, but a child born of you; your own flesh and blood will be your heir." Then God brought him outside and said to him, "Look, Abraham, at the sky. Count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that," and so then, in the story that we hear today, the three strangers come.

Abraham welcomes them with great hospitality and joyfulness and finally, after many decades, God fulfills the promise because God, the one who appears and is spoken of as the Lord God himself, says to him, "In a year, you will have your son, your heir." The beginning of the fulfillment of God's promises happened there with Abraham and Sarah, and the Jewish nation -- the chosen people -- began.

Of course, the hospitality of Mary and Martha is very clear: Jesus had been going up and down those roads -- the dusty roads in Palestine -- preaching, working, teaching, healing, and he, too, becomes tired. He needs to take a rest, so he goes to this home, where he has these friends, and they welcome him, I'm sure, with great joy. Then they begin to serve him, and that's when the dispute between Mary and Martha begins. Martha thinks she's doing everything and Mary is only sitting at the feet of Jesus, but this is where we learn about discipleship.

If you go into the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, you find what we call the Servant's Songs -- the Second Servant's Song -- someone who is not named in the history of the chosen people, but who is presented as one who foreshadows Jesus. The servant in this particular passage says, "God has taught me, so I speak as God's disciple, and I know how to sustain the weary. Morning after morning, God wakes me up to hear, to listen, like a disciple." Those who are to be the disciples of Jesus are called to hear, to listen, to really listen deeply to what God is saying in the depth of my heart so that I know how to follow God through Jesus.

Both Abraham and Sarah, Martha and Mary show us following Jesus. One of the important things is to be disciples who have listened, and then have understood: The part of following Jesus is welcoming others: drawing others in, being hospitable. There are ways in which you and I -- all of us, this parish family, our church, ourselves as individuals -- I think have to look at how we have welcomed, or failed to welcome, people into our midst.

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Pope Francis has given us some extraordinary examples of this. You may remember a few weeks ago, when he was preaching a homily during the weekday morning Mass to the people who work at the Vatican. He told them, "Look! God has come through Jesus to bring all people together into God's family, even atheists." Atheists! The people [said], "What? God is telling us to welcome atheists?" and Pope Francis said, "Yes, you don't turn anybody away."

In our communities, there are lots of ways in which we, perhaps without even being aware of it, put up barriers to people not to join us. We tell people who have been deported, "Don't come. Don't come. You can't receive Communion." We have not been very welcoming to what we call the LGBT community -- lesbian, gays and transgendered. We make them feel uncomfortable in our midst, and Jesus is telling us, "No. Welcome everyone. Welcome -- be hospitable."

Just a couple of weeks ago, Francis went to a small island just off the coast of Italy where there are

thousands and thousands of people fleeing the violence and the poverty of North Africa. They were being, some of them, pushed back. Francis went there and said, "No! You must welcome people into your midst." In our country, what are we doing for immigrants and refugees? We're building a huge wall. It's going to cost us \$39 billion to put this wall up to keep people out. How different that is from what we learn in today's lessons about hospitality --drawing people in, welcoming them, especially those in need.

The Gospel, Book of Genesis, and the Scriptures in general, and Pope Francis with his great example, is urging us to take seriously this call to hospitality. That will happen if we really do become the disciples, and this is what the incident of Martha and Mary is about. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus as a disciple. Now, she's a woman, and most women, we think, aren't going to be called to be disciples. If they are, certainly not to be leaders in our community; but Mary was called to be a disciple.

In the community of Jesus, there's no distinction. As Paul put it, "There'd be the slave or free, rich or poor, Jew or Greek," and you break down all barriers. Everyone is called to be a disciple, including women, and that would mean roles of leadership in our church. Mary is an example of the call to discipleship. She fulfills what Isaiah says: "You listen to Jesus." All of us must try to listen to Jesus and become truly his disciples; follow his way.

Finally this morning, I think the Gospel lesson especially teaches us about Jesus, and especially about Jesus as human -- one like us in every way except sin. Jesus needed that rest, that respite, to go into the home of friends and to get waited on, be pampered a little bit. He was totally human and when he was tired, he needed someplace to go where he could be welcomed and loved and affirmed, and of course, Jesus returns that.

He's a friend of Martha and Mary when they welcome him into their home, and Jesus can be a friend to all of us in the same way. If we welcome Jesus into our lives, first of all by listening to his word, by trying to follow his example, by trying to hear him speak to us in the depth of our heart, Jesus can become our friend. We can offer Jesus consolation and comfort, just as Martha and Mary did, then see what happens when we become friends to Jesus.

Later on, not in Luke's Gospel but in John's Gospel, we hear about this family of Martha, Mary and her brother, Lazarus. Lazarus is ill, so what do Martha and Mary do? Well, they want to turn to their friend Jesus, and they sent word: "Jesus, your friend Lazarus is ill, even at the point of death." They wanted him to be there. He doesn't get there in time, and both of them kind of rebuke Jesus, "Why didn't you get here?"

Then Jesus gives them a gift that goes beyond just coming to heal Lazarus from the sickness. Lazarus is already dead and buried, and so Jesus goes to the tomb, where he weeps because he loved Lazarus so much. Such a close friend. But then he also gives Lazarus, Martha and Mary a very extraordinary gift: He resuscitates Lazarus, brings him forth from the tomb, restores him to Mary and Martha. The family is whole and complete again because they had been friends to Jesus, and he is their friend.

That can happen in our lives if we come to know Jesus deeply -- welcome him into our lives, become a friend of Jesus in a very human way. Make that relationship real, and then Jesus will fill us with blessings. They'll go far beyond anything we can even hope or dream for. Jesus can be our friend and love us, and we can love him in a very human way because he is one like us in every way except sin.

So this morning as we reflect on these Scriptures, I hope we will remember how important it is to be hospitable, how important it is to listen to God's word in the depths of our heart -- to be disciples -- and then what a blessing it is to find Jesus, our friend.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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