

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – July 21, 2019
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Fifty years ago last night, my younger brother and I were allowed to stay up well past our bedtime. We gathered with our parents around our television set – the big one, the new color TV with the “giant” 25 inch screen. I don’t remember what channel we were watching – the same images were being broadcast on all **four** stations. If you are old enough to remember that evening, then no matter where you were in the world, I suspect that your memories are also centered around a television set. You see, on that one night, almost the entire world stopped what they were doing and watched silently the grainy, black-and-white image of Neil Armstrong setting foot on the moon. Fifty years later, it is hard to imagine anything that would so completely capture the world’s attention. Indeed, in the three years after the moon landing, NASA had to abandon the last two Apollo missions. Landing on the moon became routine.

In our gospel passage today, Mary of Bethany is sitting at the feet of Jesus, hanging on his every word. He has her complete attention, much in the same way that Apollo 11 had the rapt attention of the entire world. But, in this case, not everyone was listening to Jesus. Mary’s sister Martha was busy preparing and serving a meal. She was disappointed that she was doing everything herself, and undoubtedly glared a bit at Mary who was just sitting there doing nothing. When Martha asks Jesus to encourage Mary to work, we certainly expect Jesus to be on Martha’s side. We fully expect that he will say, “Mary, get up, help your sister out. Service of neighbor is important.” Instead, we are horrified to hear Jesus tell Martha that Mary has chosen the better part and she shall not be deprived of it. We can’t believe our ears. Did Jesus actually say that it is better to sit down and do nothing than it is to get up and help? Doesn’t Jesus realize that there is work to be done? Does he want us to just sit back and leave the work to others? No, he does not, which is why we must put this gospel passage in context.

Recall that last week St. Luke gave us the beautiful parable of the Good Samaritan. In it, Jesus reminds all of us that love of God is given expression when we have compassion for others, when we tend to their needs, bind their wounds, look upon them with love. Today’s passage from Luke’s gospel is found immediately after that parable. This story of Martha and Mary is meant to be read with the Good Samaritan in mind. Far from repudiating the parable, Jesus is offering us a deeper insight into its meaning, helping us to understand what Christian service is all about. He helps us put service of neighbor in perspective.

Martha, you see, was busy preparing a great meal – trying to act the perfect hostess by making everything just so. In some ways, I suppose, she reminds us of another Martha – the ever-present Ms. Stewart. But if any of you have tried to live up to the Martha Stewart standard you know how difficult it is. If you actually set a table her way – with hand painted napkins and home-made candles, all perfectly tied with ribbon and raffia, you would be too exhausted to eat. It is, in a sense, hospitality without a purpose. What Jesus is telling Martha is not that Mary should be allowed to goof-off, but that Mary has a better sense of priorities. To someone who is busy in the kitchen, Mary might have looked as though she was doing nothing, as though she was avoiding work. But Mary’s task was far more important. She was sitting at the feet of Jesus and *listening* to his word. She was learning from the master. A fancy dinner is nice, but abiding in the presence of the Lord is more important.

That is the message Jesus was conveying to his disciples, to us, through the parable of the Good Samaritan and through his visit to the home of Mary and Martha. We must be about the task of compassion, of helping our neighbor. But that service is useless if done grudgingly or for praise or out of obligation. Recall that last week, before the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus and the scholar of the law agreed that what a disciple must do first is love God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength, and – only then – to love your neighbor as yourself. Authentic Christian service, therefore, always arises out of our love of God – out of our relationship with God. And if we fail to nurture that special relationship, if we fail to be attentive to the Word, to the presence of God, by quietly abiding with him in prayer, then our service will fall flat and will be meaningless. We will either burn out or become “serv-a-holics,” those who have long since forgotten why we were serving others in the first place. Some few of us are called to lives of almost total contemplation – those are the monks and cloistered nuns of our world – though they actively share the work of their community. Most of us are called to a different path – to an apostolic life, to a life of service, though not one of service alone, but one the Church frequently describes as that of a “contemplative in action.” Jesus challenges us to be people of prayer who put the fruits of our prayer into action. We are invited to balance our prayer and our work, never neglecting one for the other. Fifty years ago, the world was gathered together in hope and excitement and, I dare say, prayer for the astronauts. Today we are invited again to step back and listen and pray. The gospel, you see, asks us to be both Mary *and* the Good Samaritan, to pray and to work, to love God and our neighbor.