

July 17, 2022
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gen. 18:1-10
Ps. 15:2-5
Col. 1:24-28
Luke 10:38-42

For the past few weeks, we have been talking about some of the essential components necessary to remain authentic disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Last week we addressed the question, “Are you a neighbor who loves? The focus was not on *whom* to love, but rather on *how* to love.

It’s not uncommon in our current electronic and media driven culture to hear the words, “I love you man” and especially when ready to say goodbye people often say, “Love you.” Whether texted or spoken, “love you” can mean a lot of things, but sadly seldom does it mean that one is willing to sacrifice any real amount of time or resources to stop, listen, and/or lend a helping hand.

You may have heard people say that while growing up, or maybe even now their parents or family members never say, “I love you.” In the many years I have spent in the counselor’s chair, I cannot tell you the number of times I have heard clients lament over the fact that they rarely heard those words from their important people.

Well may I offer another take on the subject for all those who may have felt “love” deprived? Maybe back then, whenever then was, maybe people were a little more reserved in stating I love you, while at the same time, maybe they demonstrated their love in the best way that they could under the circumstances.

Raising a family in the post-World War II, Korea, and even Vietnam eras was not an easy task. The emotional toll the fighting drained from everyone living at that time was horrendous. For them providing for their families - what they did not have during the great depression and the following war years was first priority. For many the words, I love you was reserved for a spouse and/or for the most important of all life and death events. For all other situations, love was more a practical demonstration of meeting needs than stating mere words.

Unfortunately, in our postmodern world many have attached a somewhat watered down meaning to the word love, often amounting to little more than how's it going, see you later, or I like you a lot. It's something to think about.

We concluded last week's homily with a pithy statement from the ancient pen of St Augustine - and a challenge from a more postmodern slogan used by Nike. St Augustine wrote, "Without God we cannot; without us God will not." Hence, for what it is worth, the old Nike slogan, "Just do it" while not always easy - is applicable here.

Just do it. The slogan is catchy, and it makes for great advertisements and/or silk-screenings on tee shirts; but for those who truly want to stop doing their own thing, start listening to God, and begin obeying His word; "just do it" raises a plethora of questions, one being - what exactly am I supposed to be doing?

For example, lets take the Gospel reading for today. In today's Gospel reading Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

Now, there's a statement that ought to catch our attention, how many of us may feel a little anxious and/or worrisome concerning what we are expected to be doing?

Based on what we have been talking about and from all outward appearances it would appear that Martha was the person who was actually doing the good works. Some would even consider her to be doing the work of the ministry; albeit, after all was, she not feeding the homeless, and caring for the needs of those who were without a house? Nike would have been very proud of her; she was "just doing it." Jesus had neither house, home, nor purse to support His lifestyle. Indeed, Martha appeared to be doing all the right things by providing for His temporal daily bread.

Think about it for a moment. Here she was trying to bless Jesus by serving Him some home cooked food and make Him comfortable, and Mary just would not help. She just sat there letting Martha do all the work.

Have you ever hosted a large event, and no one seemed to lift a finger in support? Well, that was Martha; overwhelmed with the task at hand. I think she was most likely trying to do the best she could under the circumstances. She may even have been thinking, "If you have done it to the least of these you have done it unto me."

So there she was keeping busy, - very busy working hard to serve Jesus while at the same time, and at least in her mind, Mary was just sitting at His feet doing nothing to help. Yet somehow, Jesus approved of Mary's behavior while questioning Martha's anxiety. What was she to think? Again, how would you feel if you were in the same place?

The problem here for some is that Jesus never clearly or explicitly described what or why Mary had chosen the better part. Think about it, all we have from the text concerning Mary's outward behavior was that she was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to Him speak.

The text doesn't indicate what He was talking about. It could have been the weather, the latest news, or a deeply moving spiritual topic. We really don't know for sure. So we are left to wonder, what exactly was Mary doing or not doing that garnered the Lord's approval? If the right choice is not made clear, then how are we to know what to do? Hence the context of the story creates a dilemma, what are we to be doing, - or is it possible that doing is not even the issue?

Author Dianne Bergant suggests that when we study all the Scripture readings for today, we will discover a common thread connecting them to the theme of "being open." "Abraham was open to receive the heavenly visitors; Martha opened her home to Jesus; and St Paul was open to the sufferings he endured for the sake of the Christ. All three people, Abraham, Mary, and St Paul were open to God. Possibly, therein lies the key to solving our dilemma concerning Mary's attitude and behavior - being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

However, openness is a rather abstract term, so how are we to understand what it means to be open? Once again we turn to the Scriptures where we are invited to compare and contrast the lives of Abraham and Sarah, and Martha and Mary.

As mentioned in the OT text, Abraham and his wife Sarah had pitched their nomadic tent by the terebinth or oak trees of Mamre

not far from Hebron. Here it is interesting to note that Mamre was not an all that friendly a place to visit because it served as a cult shrine to the Chaldean father god El. If you chose to ignore paying homage to El; well, you could find yourself in deep trouble with the locals.

Nevertheless, due to its strategic location and natural amenities people in route to and from Jerusalem would often stop at Mamre for rest and to enjoy a bit of cool shade, which eventually facilitated Mamre to develop into a very popular destination market site. So, it was that there under the branches of one of the oak trees that Abraham pitched his tent and there purposed to be open to being a good neighbor by entertaining the three heavenly visitors revealed by Moses to be the Lord.

The Gospel reading, on the other hand, invites us to the house of Martha, a place the Son of God had stopped for a little respite. We spoke earlier concerning the two sisters. Most people relate to Martha as being a domestic whirlwind and her sister Mary as a contemplative type of soul - quite willing to sit at the feet of Jesus.

Indeed it would be reasonable to assume that Martha could be described as a task-oriented person who wanted a little help from her sister, yet to no avail she felt compelled to go to Jesus for assistance. I am sure she must have been very surprised when Jesus commended Mary for the better choice telling Martha that, "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

Certainly when we compare Abraham and Martha's behavior hospitality emerges as a significant theme. Both parties were more than generous in opening their homes to care for the needy

other. Yet somehow I do not think that hospitality is at the core of today's readings. Mary had chosen a better path and it would not be taken from her. But what of Sarah, Abraham's wife; well, we will get to her in a moment lest we get ahead of ourselves.

After reading these two scripture passages I could not help but ask; was Martha acting like an Abraham? Both were graced with the Lord's presence and both invited Him into their home. Bake the bread, kill the calf, and fetch the water, milk the cow, and find the cheese; Abraham and Martha were good managers and worked diligently to serve their guests. But having done all that and more, the Lord's eye ultimately rested upon Sarah and Mary, the ones who stayed in the background listening.

So, what was it about Sarah and Mary that caught the Lord's attention? Were they more holy than their counterparts? No. Were they more religious, maybe, but probably not? So what was it about them? Did they sin less or make fewer mistakes? I don't think so. Did they have more faith? No not necessarily more, but possibly a different understanding of how to live their faith.

Nothing in either text describes precisely what they possessed, so in this case we have to look at their lives in the context of the big picture rather than the details. It appears that St. Luke, who was guided by the Holy Spirit, wanted to show us something very important by comparing and contrasting the behavior of Martha and Mary. The story of Abraham and Sarah and their encounter with the Lord God helps to add depth and perspective.

Both Mary and Martha loved Jesus; there is no doubt here. The fact that Martha owned the house might have heightened her

sense of responsibility towards serving the Lord's temporal needs. Abraham had a similar responsibility as the leader of his family.

What is interesting here is that both stories beg the question - what do we do when the Lord shows up - or reveals Himself to us? Do we busy ourselves with good things that need to be done, or do we stop to listen and just be open to or consent to His presence?

Lets first consider Abraham. We notice that when the Lord showed up he became really busy. After telling Sarah what to do, as if she didn't already know, he ran to the herd, picked out a tender choice steer, and then he ordered it slaughtered and cooked. Meanwhile he got some curds and milk. When the meat was finished being roasted he set up a table under a tree, and personally waited on them while they ate the meal. As you may already know, putting on a Bar B Q feast like that is a lot of work.

What happened next really is ironic. We can imagine Abraham anxiously waiting to hear more about the land and possessions the Lord had earlier promised him. What was going to happen, how and when, give me all the details? He could hardly wait. Then it began, one of them was about to speak, yes, yes; "Abraham," yes, "Where is your wife Sarah," who - what, there in the tent. "Next year I will return and Sarah will then have a son." Next subject.

The visit wasn't at all about Abraham. The Lord had come to see Sarah. She was the one who was to receive a blessing. It was true; she had forever wanted a baby. For her entire life she had given herself over to serving Abraham, even to the point of sacrificing her marital privileges so that he could have a son, and now she was standing right there in the presence of the Lord God, and miracle of miracles He was going to give her the desires of her

heart. Needless to say, I think we could all agree, being in the presence of the Lord is very good place to be.

Martha and Mary's situation is almost identical. Martha was busy with the details of hospitality while Mary remained in the background sitting at the feet of Jesus. Martha did all the work and Mary received the blessing.

So then, what are to learn from these examples? First, we need to realize that these stories were also intended to serve as a backdrop for next Sunday's lesson concerning prayer; however, today the important lesson concerns the merits of being in the presence of the Lord and listening to Him with an open heart. Impossibilities become possibilities when we are open to the Rhema Word of the Lord.

Unfortunately, many of us find ourselves too busy to listen to the Lord. Nevertheless, He still desires to reveal himself to us and yet as mentioned we can very easily be too busy to hear. So then, what can we do about it?

First of all, we need to recognize and own up to any unbalance in our lives. Abraham and Martha had become preoccupied with the cares and responsibilities of their day; being a hospitable host was one of them. We today have different cares, needs, and responsibilities; however, we too can become unbalanced when and if we begin to place performance above godly principle.

Off the top of my head, I can think of at least three lies that haunt most Americans:

- We are what we do for a living.
- We are what we own.
- We are what others say or think about us.

All three categories have their own unique set of snares and temptations. Needless to say, falling for any one of them can cause us to take our eyes and focus off the Lord.

So then in closing let us be mindful that Sarah received the desires of her heart listening quietly to the Lord. Mary discovered her true self while listening at the feet of Jesus, and so too can we. It was not in *their* doing, but it was being in *His* presence that they found their joy and reward.

Maybe there is something to the old saying, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). Something to think about, and then to practice.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.