

Pentecost 6 Proper 11 – Year C – Track 2 - 7-21-2019

The Rule of St. Benedict is followed by many religious communities – but it is also held up by our Presiding Bishop and our own Diocesan Bishop as an example of a “rule of life” that any may follow. At Emmaus, we have a rather worn three-volume set of Daily Readings and Meditations on the Rule, which we sometimes use at Compline or night prayer. Each date on the calendar has its own quote from the rule, followed by a reflection. And from July 16 through July 28, we read from Chapter 53 of the Rule: “Of How Guests are to be Received.” In other words, it is Benedict’s chapter on Hospitality – and it begins thus: “Let all guests be received as Christ.”

Because the Lectionary cycle of readings is dependent on the date of Easter, which is a movable feast, the readings for this Sunday do not always fall between July 16 and 28 – but this year they do, and this year I noticed. One can say, “What an interesting coincidence!” I will say, “The clever Spirit of God brought Hospitality right into my face.”

And that puts a different light on our Gospel for today. So often this story is interpreted as a contrast between action and contemplation – between doing and being. Usually we focus on the difference between Martha -the “active” life – and Mary - the “contemplative” life – with the contemplative life being seen as the “better part.” - I remember, when I first spoke to my older sister about my desire to be a cloistered Carmelite Nun, she told me that I had been given the “higher” vocation, since she was only an “active” sister who taught grade school and I was being called to be a “contemplative.” She told me, in later years, how the distinction between the two had been emphasized in her formation in the convent. These “active” sisters were warned about spending too much time in solitude, and sisters who “meditated” too much were considered suspect in some way. Similarly, when I was preparing to enter the cloistered Carmelite community, I was reminded that they were not an “active” community and there were no ‘outside’ apostolates. I shouldn’t plan on teaching or doing any outreach beyond the monastery walls.

Our Emmaus Community came about because of the recognition that, to paraphrase desert monk Charles de Foucault, “if contemplative life is possible only in the desert or behind cloister walls, then we should all have a cloister garden or a tract of desert,” because we are all called to be contemplatives - right in the midst of the ups and downs of daily life.

So one thing to focus on in this Gospel is that there is a “both/and” here – not an either/or. Both Mary and Martha are needed. Both Martha and Mary live in each of us.

But there is something else in this Gospel that calls our attention. Luke places this story immediately after the Gospel we heard last Sunday about the Good Samaritan – about loving our neighbor. We’re told that as Jesus and his disciples then “*went on their way*, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.” Martha offered Jesus *hospitality*. Only Luke has this story in his gospel. And this story is the only mention of Mary and Martha *in* Luke’s gospel. Note that Lazarus doesn’t appear here. No mention of a brother. *Martha* welcomed Jesus into *her* home. Martha was the head of the household – which was unusual. That meant she was either a widow or never married, neither being a good sign among the Jewish people. Martha was stepping out of bounds by welcoming Jesus and presumably his disciples to her home, and Jesus had no business *going* to her home.

And then there is Mary – who also steps outside the boundaries by daring to sit at the Lord’s feet. Those words are used to describe a disciple – one who sits at the feet of the teacher. Women were not to *be* disciples. The Talmud said that it was better for the Torah to be burned than to be taught to a woman. And so Jesus, too, is outside the bounds here. Martha invited Jesus into her home, but then expected everything to go on as usual, with the women preparing and serving the meal and the men gathering around and listening to the teacher.

But when you offer hospitality to the Christ, things will change. Mary is freed to come outside the constraints of her “role” and be in *relationship* to Jesus. And Martha is challenged not to slip back into the customary duality that holds up busyness as a badge of accomplishment and simply *being* with others as something close to laziness. It was grace that inspired Martha to offer Jesus hospitality to begin with, and it is the grace of that same gift of hospitality that Jesus is now extending to *her* – to both Martha *and* Mary.

No, it wasn't his home or his food. But the hospitality Jesus provided was in welcoming Mary to be the person she was, and in loving her just as she was. Jesus accepted Mary even as she stepped outside the role and position proscribed for her. He entered into relationship with her and welcomed her into his presence, his space. Martha *started* down the path of relationship with Jesus when she dared invite him to her home, but she wanted him to come into *her* space, just as it was. When she got home with Jesus and the others, she wanted to keep running things as she always had – and Jesus told her she was missing the one thing.

The one thing – remembering back to last week's Gospel – is to Love God wholeheartedly and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Last week we had a lesson in loving our neighbor – and this week we have a lesson in loving God – but *also* in loving our neighbor. Because real hospitality is about both.

In our first reading from Genesis – we are told that the Lord appeared to Abraham – that he looked up and saw *three men* standing near him. It is a story of Abraham providing hospitality to these three – whom we have been told are an appearance of God to Abraham. What he is providing to *them*, he is providing to *God*. And in turn, they provide to him the assurance that the covenant will be fulfilled – Sarah will bear a son. While Abraham showed these men hospitality, they brought into the life of Sarah and Abraham news that would change their lives forever. Abraham's and Sarah's willingness to offer hospitality brought to them the gift that they *themselves* were now freed to be all that God intended.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *Reaching Out*, says this: "Hospitality...means primarily the creation of a free space where the strangers can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is *not to change people*, but to offer them a space where change can take place."ⁱ A space where change can take place. What we learn, I think, from both our gospel and the first reading, is that when we offer true hospitality, it is *we* who will be changed. And perhaps that is why it is so difficult to *offer real* hospitality. We can feel good about ourselves when *we* can be the one providing food or clothing or lodging to the *other*. But if we truly *receive* the other, we are receiving Christ, as that pesky Rule of St. Benedict tells us. And receiving Christ will call us out of bounds, will invite us to be free, and will demand that we offer that same freedom to others. Christ will become the host, the one offering hospitality to us.

In the letter to the Hebrews we are told, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Think about that. Angels bring tidings of great joy, but they almost always also bring news that will change us and our world. I won’t hit us all over the head with the applications of all this to what’s going on in our day to day world right now. We can each struggle with how to apply it. I will only say this: If we receive each guest, each stranger, as Christ – we no doubt will be changed. But we will be changed more and more into the image and likeness of Christ, which is the goal all along.

May it be so.

- [Genesis 18:1-10a](#) [Psalm 15](#) [Colossians 1:15-28](#) [Luke 10:38-42](#)

ⁱ Nouwen, Henri. *Reaching Out*. Doubleday, New York, 1975. P. 71