

**Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C  
(July 18, 2010)**

**Martha and Mary**

Have you ever noticed how often in the pages of Sacred Scripture marvelous revelations take place during meals? This is particularly true in Luke's Gospel where we see Jesus so often sharing meals: with the disciples, with his friends, being invited to dinner – even by Pharisees – think of the scene in the house of Simon the Pharisee when the repentant woman washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. The great instance in all the Gospels, of course, is the Last Supper.

But it is true in the Old Testament as well. In today's first reading we hear the familiar story of Abraham welcoming three strangers. Abraham will receive a reward for his hospitality beyond anything he ever expected. For it turns out first of all that the three strangers represent God – or perhaps they are God – and before they leave they promise Abraham that when they return in a year he and his wife Sarah will have a son. Now at the time Abraham was 110 years old and Sarah was 91! Well, you never know what's going to happen when you entertain strangers.

Jesus was no stranger to Martha and Mary and their brother, Lazarus. On the contrary he was their dear friend. It was a welcome respite for him – these few peaceful hours in a friendly home with people who loved him

He was on his way to Jerusalem and he seemed to have a pretty good idea of what awaited him there. He had already had run-ins with the Scribes and Pharisees and they were doing their best to discredit him. In fact he was becoming a dangerous person to know. Maybe some of the people he passed in the town where Martha and Mary lived were wary of him, pulling their children inside and shutting the door.

So it was probably with a great deal of relief that he arrived at the home of his dear friends.

Now just imagine the scene at that point: Martha rushing to the kitchen to get a cool drink or a glass of wine; Mary bringing water to bathe his feet.

Then Martha, of course, rushes back to the kitchen to begin preparing the meal. I can just hear the clatter of pots and pans. I can smell the bread baking and the vegetables cooking, and Martha begins to show the signs of heavy activity, perspiration glistening on her forehead.

In the meantime Mary seats herself at Jesus' feet and listens. She listens as he tells her what has been happening – perhaps as he unburdens himself of his fears and frustrations, but speaks also of his hopes and joys.

Now I have my own spin on what happens at this point when Martha complains that Mary is not helping. I think that entirely too much has been made of Jesus' seeming rebuke of Martha. After all what Martha was doing was necessary. It was part of the demands of hospitality. But so of course was what Mary was doing. What Jesus is saying is not that Martha's work is not important, but that listening and paying close attention to the guest was even more important. I'm sure that Martha understood that as well, and I'd be willing to bet that the next time Jesus came it would be Martha at his feet and Mary in the kitchen.

It's obvious that our world needs both Martha and Mary. This is perhaps best symbolized by what happens at our Eucharist. First of all, like Mary, we sit at the feet of the Lord and listen and pray. Then, like Martha, we set the table, we bring the gifts, and we share the banquet. And when we go forth we are both Martha and Mary. There is work to be done, wounds to be healed, people to be served, an earth to be saved, but this activity, like all our activity, must be grounded in prayer. Jesus told Martha, "Don't be anxious; don't worry." He tells us the same thing. The tasks may seem too great for us. In fact by ourselves they are. But then he also tells us to be like Mary, to sit at his feet, and get the strength we need to go out and help make this world a better place to live in. The saints knew this. It's probably one the things that made them saints. Our own St. Ignatius is a great example. His companions used to call him a contemplative in action, and that is the ideal of all Jesuits: to be contemplatives in action. But then it is the ideal of all Christians: to be people who pray but who are also actively involved in making this a better world to live in. We are all both Martha and Mary.