

## Switching to Paper Plates

Homily for July 18, 2010

This is the story of two sisters. They get along very well, and they share many interests. They are known for their friendly ways – maybe even famous in town for their hospitality. Frequently, they host congenial gatherings in the humble home they share with their brother.

This day, there's more fussing with preparation than usual, because a very special guest is coming for supper. This guest visits enough to be considered more of a relative, but lately, he's been getting much more attention, and has become quite the local celebrity; so the sisters want everything to be perfect in honor of their friend. The house has been tidied up, the spare sleeping room has been swept, soft linens are folded upon the straw mat, fresh fruit is in a bowl on a simple stand, the lamp has plenty of oil.

All that remains is the preparation of the food, for the meal this night is to be exceptional...roasted spring lamb and vegetables from the garden, warm flat cakes, an earthy wine, berries for a sweet treat. Two dark heads are bent over a worktable, both intent on the task at hand. More food needs to be prepared than usual, as their guest often brings others to dine – the sisters never mind this, because he is such a dear part of their lives, and he brings such interesting people to their home!

Suddenly, much earlier than expected, there is a commotion at the door. The sound of greetings – happy ones – fill the air, and in a flash of panic, both sisters jump up and gasp! “He's here already!” cries one, as she runs from the room to say hello.

“But it's too early!” cries the other, looking around her at the pile of food that still needs attention. “I must stay to finish,” she thinks to herself. “My sister will return soon, and then I can go greet him myself,” she reasons. “After all, such an old friend will surely understand.”

Many minutes later, still alone in the kitchen, Martha grumbles to herself, “I've been here way too long on my own, and no one has come to see me or what I've been doing. That sister of mine – she doesn't care about me, or this meal. Here I am, doing all the work, and she's off with our guest – well I want to visit, too!” And off she goes in search of Mary to give her a good scolding.

Imagine how annoyed Martha is when she walks into the main room of the tiny house to find people all around, and there is her sister sitting at the feet of their very special friend, Jesus of Nazareth! What anger! What self-pity! What frustration she must feel!

“Master,” Martha demands. “Tell my sister to come to the kitchen to help me with the preparations!”

And Jesus, with patience born of many meals prepared by and shared with many women, gently says, “Martha – leave the work until later. Join us! We’re having a wonderful discussion and you’re missing it. Mary has made the right choice...come.”

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So if you were Martha, how would you feel? Clearly, the focus is on the meal and getting things ready on time, right? There’s a house full of people and time is running out – everything must be perfect or it won’t be special – isn’t this what the whole purpose of having company over is all about?

Imagine Martha’s embarrassment and surprise when she is told that, in fact, those are secondary to what’s really important – being with Jesus and making the most of their time together. It would take a very mature person to swallow her pride and allow these words to sink in to the point where she’s willing to do just that. But imagine also, her sense of belonging if she manages to come past her first instinct – and she permits herself to join her sister at the feet of their dear friend.

There are quite a few interpretations to this story of the two sisters and the visit from Jesus. Some say Jesus’ recognition and approval of Mary to sit at his feet and listen, learn, and perhaps even discuss ideas with Him implies giving permission for women of the day to study – to learn about God as men did. Others note that this story pits women against each other – those who serve in traditional women’s roles in the church versus women who want to be atypical and lead as clergy and other church decision-makers. No one answer is the “true” answer, however.

It can certainly be said that Jesus’ behavior is different than we might expect – after all, there are many stories about banquets and in some of them, Jesus serves as “host.” He knows the value of preparing a table and serving guests. And in this story, while Jesus is the guest of the two sisters, he also appears to be hosting, in a manner of speaking. He’s holding court – it’s likely he’s telling parables, and sharing their meanings. He’s the entertainment!

But perhaps this story is about more than just the preparation and sharing of a meal.

The narrative of Mary and Martha takes place deep in the time of Jesus’ ministry, and perhaps Luke tells it as a metaphor signaling change to the people of the new church, from how things have gone before to this time now, encouraging their growth to the next level of maturity in faith. Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, the Realm of God is at hand, and believers need to be diligent about **not making preparations of the body, but preparations of the soul.**

If this is an option, then Mary, risking her sister’s anger at skipping out on the preparation, certainly has chosen the better action, and Martha would be wise to follow

her sister's lead. The tale of Martha and Mary then takes on a whole new twist – and we who believe should also be more like Mary!

Let's ask ourselves a few questions...what are we doing in God's house? Are we focusing on plans and dreams about what is coming? Or are we in the moment – connecting with our God, savoring each second of learning from and loving Jesus?

I've been away from you for two very long weeks, studying and learning many things. I have so much to tell you, but one thing I want to pass along to you is this: we are more like Mary, and it's a good thing. Being more like Mary centers us, and even though we are a small church, our outreach is a strong witness to what can be done in God's name. By sitting at the feet of Jesus and just taking in his wisdom, quietly absorbing his instinct for justice and love, talking about him with one another and others in our community – we're preparing not for a huge banquet, but for a meaningful life in God's Light. We are making preparations of the soul...

You might be curious about the title of this homily (I've learned that what I do is really more of a homily than a sermon, so you'll see the change in that description next week!)...it comes from a real-life example of the Mary and Martha story from my own past.

When Don and I were newly married and his children and the grandchildren were planning to come for the holidays, we used to spend days getting the house ready for their arrival – we never clean unless company's coming. The day of the gathering, I'd spend almost all the time they were with us getting the meal ready, setting out the food and the good dishes, clearing the table, washing and putting away the dishes - fussing much like Martha did. No sooner would I finish all that I felt I HAD to do, then everyone would pack up and get ready to leave – I would miss the visit! One Christmas, I didn't even get to see the grandkids open their presents! Now, no one made me do these things, I did this to myself, because in my family that was how you showed love for people. Unfortunately, it didn't feel quite right – I felt left out.

But one year, my dear Donny said to me, "You know, if we used paper plates, you could just set the food out, let them serve themselves and then throw it all away and sit and enjoy the family instead of work like crazy and miss the whole thing." In other words, Martha-Jane, make the right choice and make the most of the time with the people you love.

Wise words from a wise guy! Since then, I've switched to using paper plates at all our family gatherings, and I'm happier and more blessed for it. Who knew it could be so simple?

I think the "Mary" way is the way to go in faith, and in life. Thank goodness Martha and I – and all of us – finally get it. Amen.