

## Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Lk 10:38-42

Dear Friends,

Today's short passage of Luke's gospel seems like a simple story. It tells us there must be a balance between prayer and action, service and contemplation. However, when we are delving into the gospel of Jesus, we are always running into a mystery of profound depth. There are always new levels beckoning us into multilayered stages of understanding and action. Likewise, we are exposed to the shattering of our cultural norms.

In today's story Jesus challenges us on the role of women in his day and ours. Here are five points where today's gospel contests the status quo:

- In Jesus' time women were not allowed to be students of the Law. In our story we have Mary in the position of a disciple, listening attentively at the feet of Jesus.
- When the guest is a prophet, the proper response is to listen the Word of God being proclaimed. Mary is attentive to this task. She again shatters the accepted function of her culture as a woman.
- In contrast to the multiple biblical stories of conflict between brothers, this is the singular story of conflict between sisters.
- Jesus entered into a house with only two women present according to the story. This was a deliberate violation of the expected behavior.
- The entire episode of Jesus' interaction with two women contains multiple violations of the culture and proclaims the dignity of the two sisters. There is not much here to say the proper place for women is in the kitchen.

True hospitality is a major theme of the story. Martha, as is so often our own experience in life, lets her anxieties and concerns define her action. It is clear her desire is to put on a great culinary display. She is more present to herself than to Jesus. She is not in touch with Jesus' situation. He is in the midst of a traumatic experience on the road to Jerusalem. On the other hand, Mary is focusing on Jesus. Her hospitality is defined by the needs of her guest.

It is no easy task to achieve a balancing posture that integrates prayer and service. The two elements of prayer and service are easily distorted by the ever-present demands of the ego. Only true spiritual maturity will allow us sufficient self-knowledge to be aware of the power of our self-deception. A pattern of deep personal prayer will free us to act with true faithfulness that actually integrates prayer and service.

Teresa of Avila tells us that it is in the conclusion of the spiritual journey that the traits that we characterize in Martha and Mary become one in us. Our goal is to achieve a freedom for the true love for God and neighbor. In the meanwhile, the grace is in our struggle to seek this integration and authenticity in our life.

