

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

Sisters are related, right? That's an important thing to remember when reflecting on the episode in today's Gospel.

In the course of Christian history there has often been a tendency to look at this account as evidence of one way of life being better than another.

I think that would be a misreading of the story.

From a literary standpoint, the fact that the two women involved are sisters says something about their respective approaches to Jesus' visit.

Martha is right in wanting to extend hospitality to Jesus. The first reading gives us an impression of the importance of that value in Jewish culture.

Abraham sees three travelers suffering from the heat of the day, and it's a natural response for him to want to make them at home.

Martha wants Jesus to feel at home, too. The problem arises, I suppose, when she looks at Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, and attending to what he is talking about, as not carrying her weight.

For Martha, it seems, hospitality is all about doing for someone: fixing them a meal, for example, and those other tasks which go with it: putting out the

fine china, flowers on the table, I don't know, all sorts of things.

This is all done without ever inquiring of Jesus what he might prefer.

Mary's approach is different. She also receives Jesus into her home, but sees what he is really after. Jesus is all about proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God.

For someone who wants nothing more than to share the good news of God's love, the best thing you can do is to give them a chance to do that. That's the form that Mary's hospitality takes.

I'm guessing that Martha is probably the older sister and is used to running the show. If we imagine that Mary was put in charge for the meal, they probably would still have had something to eat, maybe something simpler and after everyone had had a chance to visit first.

And, no doubt, Mary would have had to ask Martha for help.

Both sisters have their approach. And both perspectives have to be present in our lives, too.

This Gospel really can't be about promoting one form of life over another. To do that quickly makes some Christians into second class citizens, as if to say the only way you

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can really be serious about living your faith is if you join a monastery.

What Jesus is really getting at, if I'm on the right track, is that it's dangerous to get so caught up in the doing that we miss the opportunity to really encounter Christ and what he's after; what he wants to impart to us.

There Mary has taken the lead.

She has avoided the pitfall of hyperactivity in favor of simply being receptive to Jesus, providing him with a welcome ear.

That's a good thing to hear if you have a tendency to get caught up in the doing. Being receptive is also important.

In fact, Jesus seems to be saying that it ought to come first. It provides the grounding and rootedness that makes our doing truly productive.

To be honest with you, I encounter this issue a lot in the confessional. People come in and confess how impatient they have been, and quick-tempered. More times than not at least part of that comes from the fact that their lives are being lived at such a pace that they cannot help but be frazzled by it.

A little down time for prayer, or simply catching a deep breath, would do wonders. Sometimes that's what I give them for a penance.

Surely, we all have things we have to be about doing. But, if nothing else, today's Gospel does give us permission to push the pause button, to stop and simply be receptive to what Jesus is trying to convey to us.

It will help greatly in fostering in us a sense of rootedness and orientation, and give us the sort of vision where we can see more easily what is really important and what we can leave to one side.