

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Genesis 18: 1-10a; Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 5; Colossians 1:24-28 and Luke 10: 38-42)

This coming fall, after 3 years of planning and saving I am taking a trip with four other friends to Umbria, Italy. As part of our preparation we are all reading the book Living in a Foreign Language by Michael Tucker subtitled *A Memoir of Food, Wine and Love in Italy*. The stories of his experiences called to memory one of my own. In late September early October of 1996, I traveled to Italy with my cousin Judy and three mutual friends, another priest – Father Don and two of my cousin’s High School classmates, Joanne and Arlene, both of whom and their families came to be friend’s of mine from the very first parish I served after ordination. We flew into Zurich, Switzerland and then traveled by train into and all around Italy. About our fifth or sixth day into the trip we came to the town of Foligno, in Northeast Italy, not far from Assisi. Living in Foligno is the Agnasi family who are relatives of a friend of Joanne’s family here in Minnesota. When we arrived we found a little pensione and from there Joanne called the Agnasi home- the mother, Agnes was thrilled that we called and invited us for dinner in a few hours. But first she sent her oldest son Stephano to meet us at the hotel and take us to his home. At the time he was 28, a banker in town. We did not go directly to their home – Agnes needed time to prepare – so we took a walking tour of the town with Stephano as our guide and then he took us to meet their parish priest – the Rector/Pastor of the Duomo (Cathedral) in town. A few hours after the tour began we arrived at the Agnasi home where Agnes and the family welcomed us – Mr. Agnasi was away on business. Remember Agnes only had a couple of hours to prepare after hearing of our arrival but the feast laid before us was incredible and we sat for four hours eating, drinking wine and visiting – our Italian was minimal at best, and with the exception of Stephano their English was minimal, so he translated back and forth, he got a break when the youngest son, 10 years old at the time, was instructed by his mother to entertain us with music – he was a very proficient piano player.

We arrived back at our pensione late but having been the recipients of extraordinary hospitality. Strangers when we arrived we went to bed that night sated by the magnificent food, a little light headed from the good Italian wine but having been welcomed as family.

The next morning the middle Agnasi son, Roberto, skipped classes which I'm sure he did not mind at all, and picked us up at our hotel, the evening before he had called a cousin of Joanne's from the village of Scopoli in the mountains above Foligno and the cousin Ugo came down and the two (in very small cars) transported us all up to Scopoli for the day. When we arrived there Ugo, also the village Mayor and his wife Baldina welcomed us to their home – again a feast, this time breakfast and good strong Italian coffee had been prepared for us. Baldina was quite excited that this surprise visit had afforded her the opportunity to make an early morning visit to the village bakery for breads and sweets for “her visitors from America.” Our visit had also apparently given her the most welcome opportunity to tell everyone at the bakery about our impending arrival – which also greatly delighted her. Again we spent a long time eating and visiting– before touring the village and their beautiful little church.

The welcome we as relative strangers received from both families – the gracious hospitality afforded us by them that was simply second nature to them was really wonderful – a precious gift to us on the trip.

I thought of these experiences again as I reflected on today's scriptures; The reading from Genesis and the Gospel passage from Luke are about hospitality.

In the reading from Genesis we hear of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three strangers – these three men had been sojourning in the desert and Abraham true to his culture as a nomadic desert dweller would never pass up the opportunity to welcome the stranger in. It was more than a social obligation and not about family pride, for the nomadic people knew that one day their hospitality could mean the difference between life and death for themselves or their loved ones.

Abraham and Sarah wash the stranger's feet making them more comfortable and they feed the men and offer them drink for their thirst. Because they go out of their way to offer hospitality they are promised the blessing in old age of a son, an heir for which they had longed.

Luke tells us of Martha who along with her sister Mary and her brother Lazarus were friends of Jesus. Martha "welcomes" Jesus into her home. This sense of welcome, hospitality, openness will become a most significant aspect of early Christianity. It suggests that it is a gospel value to receive people always as the guest with whom one shares life.

The spread of Christianity depended on this welcoming spirit – because others welcomed the apostles and the other disciples who went traveling as missionaries of Christ's Way the message and mission of Jesus spread and the Church expanded. Paul the apostle imbued with this spirit wrote of the necessity of welcoming others and in his writing to the Church community at Rome urged them to welcome those of other views and practices and do so in Christ's name.

Today, because of this value in Church practice over the centuries, in the rule of Saint Benedict, followed for over 1500 years; it states clearly that it is imperative that all who wish to live the rule of Benedict must always recognize: *"that all strangers are to be welcomed as if they are Christ."*

However, in today's Gospel story the somewhat idyllic scene changes, for Martha's sister Mary, sits at the feet of Jesus just "listening to him speak". In the culture of the day this would have been the privileged place of only the men but here is Mary with them. Martha, "burdened with much serving," complains. One would think that because Jesus was friend to both he would have been sympathetic to Martha but instead he chides her for her worrisome anxiety and says Mary "has chosen the better part" and it will not be taken away from her.

This Gospel story has produced much rich interpretation over the centuries. In much of church history it has been understood to exalt the contemplative life (Mary's part) over the active life (Martha's part).

Having just heard in last Sunday's gospel Jesus' story of someone who goes the extra mile to help a suffering neighbor, in this instance we would expect Jesus to have urged Mary to help her sister Martha. The key, however, may be in the description of Mary sitting at the Lord's feet, an example of discipleship. Mary's ministry of the word is defended in the face of the more traditional gender role as played by Martha. The point of this narrative, when coupled with that of the Good Samaritan, is that love of God and of neighbor, which is what the life of following Christ is about, requires both compassion toward the stranger and neighbor and silent sitting in God's presence. The evangelist Luke reminds us that both are necessary to true discipleship, the story may highlight Mary but in the larger context it does not reject Martha.

The lesson for us is that the Church of Christ's disciples, striving to be a welcoming community, cannot thrive and be vibrant without both the ministry that identifies with Martha's service and with Mary's listening and receptive heart.

Each time we gather here as a community to celebrate the Eucharist we are first invited to "sit at the feet of Jesus listening to the WORD" and then nurtured by both Word and Sacrament – Christ's Body and Blood – we are compelled to go forth to "love and serve" the Lord present in both neighbor and stranger alike.

[Reflections on the Scriptures of the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C by the Rev. Michael Papesh and my own – Rev. Paul Jaroszeski.]