

HOMILY FOR SUNDAY, JULY 22nd

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Introduction

This morning at breakfast I asked the women in our community what they thought about today's Gospel where Jesus defends his friend Mary, saying that she has "chosen the better part" in sitting at his feet listening to him rather than working in the kitchen as her sister Martha wished. (Luke 10:42)

To a person they said in effect "easy for Jesus to say; but who was going to get his meal if both Mary and Martha sat around at his feet?"

I

Let me suggest that there is much more to the story, and that it can be seen in a totally different light.

In the first place we have quite a normal, healthy friendship going on in the story. Martha's complaint that her sister is leaving all the work to her bespeaks a real life situation among the sister and their friend Jesus.

It's clear from other passages of the Gospels that the home of Martha and Mary in Bethany, near Jerusalem, was a real haven for Jesus. It was where he spent those last few days of his life, just before he went over to Jerusalem for the Passover meal - his Last Supper - and his eventual capture, torture and execution.

In addition, when the brother of Martha and Mary, Lazarus, died Jesus was so moved at the loss the sisters had suffered that "he wept", and those who saw him remarked at how much he loved the sisters and their brother. (John 11).

So it's good to understand today's Gospel in terms of Jesus' capacity and need for friendship.

II

What is more, this Gospel says a great deal about Jesus' understanding about the place of women in his time and in all times. In Jesus' day Jewish women

were excluded from serious conversations about God's law. From what historians can determine, women remained in the background of debates, expected to carry out household chores.

In defending Mary's right to sit and converse with Jesus things that surely related to God's law, he was breaking through that custom. He says as much to Martha and even invites her to join the conversation: "You are anxious and worried about many things - Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her". (Luke 10:41-42) In effect Jesus is saying that a woman's place is not only in the kitchen.

III

That unique understanding of this Gospel leads me to think about how different our current U.S. history would be if we had more women in decision-making positions. I'm convinced that were that the case we would not have invaded Afghanistan nor Iraq but found a much more creative and life-serving way to respond to the disaster that befell our country on September 11, 2001.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a story told by the great Cardinal-Archbishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil, Pablo Evaristo Arns, now living in retirement there. He said that during his time as archbishop the Church of Sao Paulo had to absorb about 1000 new people every day. That was the number which migrated into that city and all were baptized Catholics. The Cardinal's way of absorbing that many people was through the Base Christian Community structures which the archdiocese had in place there at that time.

Arns told us that on one occasion there was a huge strike called by working people in Sao Paulo and a massive demonstration planned. The government warned the strikers that if they took to the streets the army would be called out to prevent the demonstration. The Base Christian Communities, many of which were directed by women, gathered to plan a response to the government's threat. They decided to go ahead with the demonstration, sending their children out in the front lines of the marchers, with the women themselves behind the little ones and to the rear their menfolk. The women wagered that the soldiers would not shoot children - and they were correct. The demonstration took place peacefully.

Cardinal Arns concluded the story by remarking how creative solutions can emerge when women take leadership.