

16th Sunday, 2007

1. Our first reading and our Gospel today allow us to look at women in worlds different from our own. In the first reading from Genesis Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent in the middle of the day when three men approach. According to mi-eastern customs of hospitality, he invites them to eat. When they accept his invitation, he is all a bustle to prepare a meal for them. He enlists the aid of his wife Sara (Hurry, get some rolls made, he tells her) and of a servant who will prepare the meat, and then he gets the milk. When all is ready he serves the men under a tree in front of his tent. Then one of them tells him: I will return in a year and by that time Sarah will have borne a son.

2. Our reading stops there, but the next verses in Genesis could be called entertaining or even funny. They tell us that Sarah was listening to the conversation of the men from behind the entrance of the tent, and when she heard that she would have a baby, she laughed to herself because she was beyond child-bearing age. But the man who said this, who is God, then says to Abraham: “Why did Sara laugh? Is anything too marvelous for the Lord to do?” And Sarah, we are told, because she was now afraid, lied by answering, “I didn’t laugh.” But God said, “Yes, you did.”

3. In today's Gospel we are again at a dinner for an invited guest. The guest is the Lord and his hosts are two sisters. Again, there is a great deal of work to be done for the guest, but this time it is not a team effort. One sister, Martha, is doing all the work while the other one, Mary, is doing nothing. And Martha the worker finally protests to the guest, a fact which tells us that this guest was no stranger: Doesn't it bother you that my sister has left me to do all the work? Tell her to help me.

4. Commentators point out to us that in this story Mary violates the traditional understanding of a woman's role by not engaging in the preparation for the meal but instead sitting at the feet of the Lord and listening to him speak. In doing this she is claiming the role of a disciple for herself, and in her day that role was restricted to men. Such behavior would of course have aroused the wrath of her sister who was adhering to the traditional role of the woman. Needless to say, this question of the roles women can and should play is very much alive today in our society and in our church, and you can see in what direction this present story is heading. At the very least it is teaching us that both men and women are called to be disciples of the Lord, to sit at his feet and listen to his words.

5. But sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his words is a description of prayer or prayerful reflection. Thus the point of today's Gospel story is that prayer is more important than serving others, even more important than preparing a meal for a guest.

6. What we value has to occupy a certain amount of space and time in our lives. True, there is not a strict corollary between the amount of time we give to something and its value to us. For example, we may value someone's friendship very highly and still not spend a great deal of time with that friend. Maybe he or she lives far away. On the other hand, if we never call that friend, then that friendship is going to become a cherished memory but it will not be part of our lives today. What we value as more than a memory has to be present in our lives here and now, and that means that we have to give it time and space in them.

7. So the obvious question: if I say I value being a disciple of Jesus, do I give some time to sitting at his feet and listening to his words? If I don't, something is wrong. My discipleship will become a beautiful memory, but it will no longer be an active ingredient in my life now.

8. For those of us who no longer work, there is really no excuse for not praying. We can make the time to do so. That takes discipline, but without this discipline there is no discipleship. Come to daily Mass, say a rosary, pray the Office, spend 15 minutes a day reading the Old or New Testament. Practice meditation. There is no excuse for our not praying.

9. There is more an excuse for those who are still working and raising children. Nevertheless, you too must find time and space to pray. That requires discipline with time and space in your lives, but without this discipline there is not discipleship.

10. Gandhi once said that if one percent of the population of the world prayed, there would be peace in the world. I believe that too—provided it is real prayer, prayer in which we listen and are changed, and not just a barrage of our words shouted in the ears of the Lord.