

Homily for July 18, 2010 (16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)
Genesis 18:1-10a; Psalm 15; Colossians 1:24-28; Luke 10:38-42

One still-unfulfilled goal of my life is to become a musician. I really appreciate the passion, dedication, and creativity as well as the art, craft and science of making beautiful music. I also know that behind every hour of performance are countless hours of practice; and along with every fine musician is also a sound instrument.

Musicians know that caring for an instrument requires that they keep it clean, play it regularly, and make sure that it is in tune. Many use a simple device called a tuning fork to ensure to help ensure that the notes produced by their instruments are the notes they and their audiences expect.

The science behind a tuning fork is pretty simple: when it's tapped lightly and set down, it emits a musical tone composed of vibrations. When the vibrations produced by the musical instrument and those produced by the tuning fork are in sync, the instrument is in tune.

In many ways, we are like tuning forks. When a person matches the "vibe" of our hearts, minds and bodies, we often say that we are "in tune" with them. In our gospel reading, Mary chose "the better part" because the attention of her entire being was focused on Jesus as she "sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak." Martha, by contrast, was "burdened with much serving" and, in his words, "anxious and worried about many things." She was out tune and, judging from her exasperated cry ("Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving?") quite out of sorts, too!

This passage from St. Luke's gospel has historically been the subject of some rather unfortunate misinterpretations. These were often based on a false dichotomy between prayer and contemplation on one hand and work and ministry on the other. The former were valued and the latter discounted. This, in turn, had its roots in an even more fundamental dualism that has bedeviled the Church since the Gnostic heresies of the first centuries after Christ: the opposition between the spirit and the body.

Jesus, God's word made flesh among us, the one who was fully human *and* fully divine, did not see ministry and prayer, work and contemplation in opposition to each other. Instead, they were complementary; and the gospels are filled with examples of Jesus periodically withdrawing from his intense ministry for times of prayer and spiritual renewal (e.g., Mark 1:14-35, Luke 5:15-16).

Regardless of some of the "traditional" interpretations of this gospel privileging prayer and contemplation over work, if we look at this passage closely we notice that Jesus was actually silent about Martha's activity. Instead, what caught his attention was her troubled spirit.

I can readily identify with Martha. As Provincial Minister I sometimes find myself so “burdened with much serving” and so “anxious and worried about many things” that I fail to be attentive to Christ who is present in the midst of it all. My body may be in morning Mass or Evening Prayer, but my heart and mind are back in the office, at an airport, or on my “to do” list!

It is in those moments that I am called to get back “in tune” with God by renewing my spirit of hospitality. Simply put, I need to bring my anxieties to prayer, lay them down, and make room for the Lord in my heart and mind. The way that works best for me is to become more conscious of my breathing.

As I deliberately slow down and become more mindful of my inhaling and exhaling, I also become more conscious that every breath I take is a gift from God and a manifestation of the life we have from the hands of our Creator. It is no accident that the Hebrew and Greek words for “breath” (*ruah* and *pneuma* respectively) are also translated as “spirit.” When we become more attentive to God within us, we also become more attentive to God elsewhere in our midst.

Our first reading featured the example of Abraham as a host *par excellence*, attentive and even extravagant in serving his guests. He ran out to greet them; bowed low to the ground as a sign of reverence; had water brought out for them to bathe their feet; brought them out of the desert sun to the shade underneath a tree; prepared rolls from the equivalent of 20 pounds of flour; prepared a whole steer; brought them curds and milk; and personally waited on them.

The word “hospitality” is derived from the Greek *xenos*, which means not only “stranger” but also “guest” and “host.” This also is no accident. As our gospel passage and first reading especially show us, when we show hospitality to God we also discover that God is showing hospitality to us!

Just as Abraham and Sarah went “above and beyond” to minister to the needs of their guests, God’s messengers, so God would go far “above and beyond” by granting them the gift of a son when both thought it was impossible, even laughable. Isaac, whose name means “laughter” in Hebrew, became the living sign of God’s hospitality and covenant with Abraham, a covenant rooted in Abraham’s faith, which made room for God in his life.

Similarly, when St. Paul wrote that in his sufferings he was “filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ,” he wasn’t implying that Jesus’ suffering and death were not enough to save us. Rather, he was committed to making real and present in his own body and ministry what Christ had already done for us—in short, to be a generous host as well as a gracious guest.

The “real presence” of Christ is not only in the Eucharist. It can also be in us, if we make room for him. As we are guests at his table, may we also grow in our desire to be good hosts to others—particularly the strangers in our midst—and give thanks that God is an even more wonderful host to us. +