

TWO KINDS OF HOSPITALITY: 16TH SUNDAY C

'Martha, Martha,' Jesus says, 'you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one.'

The most important thing in life is surely our relationships. It seems that women are more likely to accept that truth than men. Certainly relationships, and more specifically friendships, mattered a great deal to Jesus. In today's charming story from the pen of Luke, we hear that on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus drops in on his ever-loving friends- the two sisters Martha and Mary.

In the desert storms of his life right now, their home, their warmth and hospitality, are a kind of oasis. Think of where Jesus is heading when this incident occurs. He's on his way to Jerusalem, and most likely, on his way to be murdered there. Presumably his whole personality is convulsed with the battle raging inside him to accept that this is very likely to happen, and that somehow this fits into God's plan for a better world (the kingdom of God). Faced with such prospects, right now what he wants most of all is an oasis of peace and quiet, of rest and relaxation, and of calm, quiet conversation.

Martha is a good, kind and generous woman. But here is one of the problems of life. So often we want to be kind to people but in our own way, by giving them what we assume they want. But when we discover that they have other ideas and put us off, we may take offence and complain that they do not appreciate our love and generosity. We may forget that being truly kind to another is to become aware of what she or he really needs most of all.

This is where Martha makes a big mistake. She sets out to be kind to Jesus, but it has to be her way of being kind. She fails to see into the heart of Jesus to discover that what he needs and wants right now is not a lot of hustle and bustle, not the clanging of pots and pans, not the hissing of a kettle or the crackling of a fire, not mounds of food, and certainly not a lot of fussing and fretting and fuming. Right now what he wants more than anything else is to kick off his sandals, take it easy, and talk and talk with friends who will take the time to listen. Mary, with more sensitive antenna than her sister in the kitchen, picks this up, sits at his feet and listens carefully. So when Martha gets mad and interrupts the flow of conversation, she cops a bit of a mouthful from Jesus, including his special words of praise for her sister's choice.

A lady called Alice Camille has brought the Martha and Mary story up-to-date. She speaks from her own experience when she writes: -

I have often been a guest in Martha's home. I visit ... someone whom I have longed to see, and am treated with great kindness and attention to my every need. The best china, the nicest desserts come out, and I never see the bottom of my coffee cup, for it is vigilantly refilled. Yet all the while, enjoying every good thing that comes to me, I am longing for my friend to sit down. After all, I have come to be with her, not her dishes.

I have also been to Mary's house. The moment I come in, she grabs me by the arm and we sit down. We talk, laugh, the hours go by and maybe I am hungry, or I have to cough before a glass of water is offered. The room gets cold and no one closes a window or stirs up the fire. I may be uncomfortable at Mary's house, but we have a darn good visit.

Alice Camille goes on to comment: -

It is best, of course, not to have to choose. Martha's hospitality was welcome and good. Mary might have been more considerate of her sister, sharing the chores and the chance to be with Jesus. But if the choice has to be made, presence is always the better part. The relationship will keep without the cookies, but not without heart speaking to heart.

There's a message in such real life stories for us, whether we are women or men. Sustaining relationships in general and friendships in particular requires sensitivity to what the other needs and wants more than anything else. So, with our fellow human beings, there's a time for action and a time for reflection, a time for doing and a time for being. There's a time for talking and a time for listening, a time for noise and a time for silence, a time for helping but not for imposing.

With our God there is definitely a time for doing, but there's also a time for listening to God's word - thinking, reflecting and praying - just as we are doing at Eucharist today and every Sunday. A time, therefore, to be just like Mary in Luke's beautiful story of the two sisters Martha and Mary, with their best friend, Jesus!

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