

Eighth Sunday after Trinity
July 21, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 10:38-42

One of the great gifts of becoming a Catholic priest has been the requirement to pray. That is, canon law requires that I say the daily office, the prescribed prayers and lessons from Scripture read every morning and evening. Canon law also strongly urges me to say Mass every day, though I do not sin if I miss a day here or there in this regard. This gift from the Church to her clergy has meant for me that I pray now more than I ever have.

Now one would think that a clergyman from any denomination would spend a good amount of time each day in prayer, and I know many of our separated brethren do. But when I was an Episcopalian cleric, praying every day was not required; so while I often said the daily office, there were many days I did not. This was not because I was lazy. Far from it. In fact, for a time back then I logged the hours I put in each week and found I regularly worked sixty-five or more hours every seven days. I often would not take a day off, and when something important—or what I thought was important—came up, I would skip my prayers. I would do everything else and let prayer fall by the wayside. I made myself too busy to pray.

I can relate then to the story of Martha and Mary because I have now played both roles. Martha thought that the most important thing she could do was to show hospitality to our Lord when He graced them with His presence. She sought to honor him by working hard; St. Luke tells us she “was distracted with much serving.” And more than that, Martha thought that everybody else should have her priorities: she tried to get Jesus to send Mary away from Him so she too could serve their honored guest.

Jesus’ reply to Martha, however, should cause us to question our own priorities. He says to Martha, “You are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion.” We can surmise from this that Jesus approved of what Mary was doing and disapproved of what Martha chose to do when He came into the sisters’ presence. Hospitality was not the priority; but what was?

If we look at what Mary did when Jesus came, we see that she “. . . sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.” She was not being lazy, as Martha implied through her complaint. Rather, Mary recognized what was most truly important and chose to listen to the words of the Son of God instead of honoring her guest in a less reverent way. This is not to say that hospitality is not important, but that we can never put “much serving” on the same level as the good we will derive from listening to the word of the Lord. Without even considering Martha’s motives for her actions, we note here that Jesus has said explicitly that listening to Him is more important than the hospitality we offer and, indeed, anything else we do.

There’s a very simple reason for this, and St. Paul touches on it in today’s Epistle from his letter to the Colossians. He says that as a minister of the Gospel he warns every man and teaches every man in all wisdom. Here Paul tells us what we already knew, that there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is what we must know and wisdom is knowing how to use our knowledge. If we are knowledgeable, but not wise, we end up like the fictional scientist Frankenstein, able to do amazing

things, but without understanding the implications of our actions. This, after all, is the point of Shelley's story, that knowledge without wisdom is deadly and always ends tragically.

Therefore, in order for us to serve the Lord rightly, we must first listen to Him. If we are to love Jesus as He desires us to love, we must sit with Mary at the feet of Jesus and listen to His teaching. The priest who stands in the place of Christ, who stands *in persona Christi*, thus has a stringent obligation to speak the unadulterated truth about the demands of the Gospel, as well as the magnitude of God's love that makes the Christian life possible. On laymen is laid the responsibility of never missing Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. We go to assist at Mass not only to receive the graces present in the sacraments, but also for the Word of God, which informs us how to use the graces so freely bestowed upon us. We leave Mass with our wills intact and hopefully better informed about what God would have us do. So of all the things we do each week, the most important is our attendance at Mass, where we sit at the Lord's feet and listen to his teaching. Many people concern themselves on Sunday with matters less important, but this is the fruit of missing Mass in the first place. In setting prayer aside to do something else, we begin a pattern of depriving ourselves of the very thing we need the most.

You will note, though, that I began with an anecdote about my personal prayer life as a priest and earlier as an Anglican clergyman. What I'm taking for granted here is that our prayer life must resemble Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus. That is, we must spend much time in silence, so we can hear what Jesus is saying to us. Those parts of the Mass where it's quiet and it doesn't seem like anything is happening are there for a reason; they are there on purpose. We spend much time petitioning God, and this is good and holy and right. But we must also take the time to hear God speaking to us. So in the same way the Mass has periods of silence, so our own personal devotions must include time to listen.

Toward the end of my time in the Episcopal Church my life, you can imagine, was in turmoil. I fell into one conflict after another, and as soon as I put out one fire another worse would ignite. In my anxiety and confusion, I recovered the necessity of prayer when God sent me on a retreat. I left everything behind and drove to the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. For the first time in too long, I found myself in silence and at prayer, and having finally done what God was calling me to do all along, I heard the solution to the dilemma that in my busyness had confounded me. I came home from Maryland, the land of Mary, with the blueprint for the parish God has established here in Providence. Having taken the time to listen, all I had to say was, "Yes" to being reconciled to Holy Mother Church.

We've worked very hard since then, but I haven't experienced the turmoil many of us knew in 2004. That's only because I learned at last the lesson of Martha and Mary. I stopped imagining all the stuff I was doing was really important and made my first priority to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to His teaching. May this be our intention for ourselves and all our neighbors.