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Finding Time for Both Prayer and Service

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Finding Time for Both Prayer and Service

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Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 21, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Gn 18:1-10; Ps 15; Col 1:24-28; Lk 10:38-42

FINDING TIME FOR BOTH PRAYER AND SERVICE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Whether in a municipal parking lot in Manhattan or on the streets of a city in the Middle East, one finds people eager to help the visitor, often with a hand outstretched for a "tip". In areas of the Middle East not frequented by tourists, however, the stranger will enjoy a marvelous experience of hospitality, and any effort to reimburse will be rejected. "It is my duty to help the stranger". This generosity is part of an ancient tradition expressing the golden rule. The Torah (Law) of Moses expresses this ideal clearly: "You must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt" (Dt 10:19).

This principle is based on the realization that anyone might be a stranger on some occasion and would find that hospitality may save a life. Moreover, the doctrine that every human being is created in the divine image brings another dimension to the duty of receiving the stranger. "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels" (Heb 13:2). The allusion is to the example of Abraham, who exhorted three passersby to stop for a meal. Later he realized that God had manifested himself and would fulfill the promise of a child for Sarah, Abraham's elderly wife. "Because of his faith and hospitality, a son was given to him in his old age..." (*1 Clement to Corinthians 10:7*).

The attitude which we have towards strangers is an aspect of the spiritual life that contributes to our eternal destiny.

"These are the things of which one enjoys the fruits in this world and the principal in the world to come: honoring parents, practice of lovingkindness...visiting the sick, hospitality to strangers, offering a dowry for a poor bride, attending the dead to the grave, devotion in prayer and making peace between people; but the study of the Torah excels them all" (*Babylonian Talmud Shabbath 127a*).

The parable of the sheep and the goats with its judgment scene reminds us that Jesus presented the same message; he was building on the teaching that each person is in God's image to declare that Jesus himself experiences the beneficence or neglect shown toward others. "I was hungry and you gave me food... a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you cared for me..." (Mt 25:35-36).

There was a lesson to be learned by those who failed to respond to the human needs of their neighbors and yet Jesus did not exalt activity over *being* in the divine presence. "Do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven" (Lk 10:20).

Jesus certainly appreciated the hospitality of Martha, and no doubt thanked her for the service she offered. Her complaint about Mary's seeming idleness, however, led to an important lesson. Other Jewish teachers would extol the study of God's Word in the Torah ("Law of Moses") above even the most generous deeds of service even though these constitute imitation of God. How can one imitate the divine signs of love without constantly striving to learn from the examples given in the Scriptures? As the disciples slowly began to appreciate the message of Jesus -- indeed his very person, he conveyed a new experience of God's Word. Women as well as men were called to become listeners in order to absorb the Master's teaching. "The only thing necessary" of which Jesus spoke (Lk 10:42) is the intimacy with him that places all else in proper perspective. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all other things will be given to you besides" (Mt 6:33).

In the early Church, this passage was used to compare the celibate life consecrated to God with the response of others, pitting Mary against Martha as two "states of life". In later times, the contemplative community was identified with Mary and congregations of religious engaged in various apostolic activities were like Martha. Although this passage may serve such a purpose, the original intention of the Gospel was not to make such distinctions. Rather, the challenge should touch all Christians; we all need to place prayer and quiet reflection on God's Word ahead of the multitude of activities in which we are engaged. To serve God and neighbor effectively every Christian needs to listen intently at the feet of Jesus --- and to stand at the foot of the cross. Only then can we "fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church" (Col 1:24).