

“The Better Part”
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Homily Given by Rev. Mr. Peter B. Swan
July 17, 2016

(Genesis 18:1-10); (Colossians 1:24-28); (Luke 10:38-42)

A few years ago, my wife Pansy and I were entertaining a friend at our home. When he arrived, he and I sat in the den talking while Pansy busied herself in the kitchen, getting the meal ready. After a few minutes, our friend got up, went into the kitchen, took Pansy by the hand and brought her back to the den, and asked her to sit with us. He said that the meal was not important and that he was there to spend time with both of us.

What do you want from a Sunday Homily? As we gather here to worship this morning, what is it that you want me to speak about? Many of you will answer, “A message that links the Scripture of the day to my life here and now.” That’s pretty much what the Church says a Sunday homily should be. So let’s see if we can do just that. Let me begin by asking you these questions: Are we workaholics, or do we take time to lift our heads up, breathe deeply, observe the beauty around us, and listen to the birds sing? Do we miss what God is doing in the world because of our business, or are we attentive to the voice of God on a daily basis? Today’s readings are all about comfort and hospitality and about how we go about spending our time.

Many of us can see ourselves in Martha. Like her, we get up each morning with a “to-do” list a mile long that we came up with during the night as we lay in bed. We are so committed to serving God and others that we hit the ground running. We are critical that others are not as committed and/or as efficient as we are. So we busy ourselves, just like Martha.

Interestingly, Jesus never condemns Martha, or us for our commitment to work, especially work for Him. What He does attempt to do is to help us realize that when our “to-do” list or tendency to serve becomes excessive, starts creating anxiety in our heart, and distracts us from enjoying Him, it is time to step back and re-evaluate. Jesus helps us do that by telling us about two wonderful, godly women, Mary and Martha, His friends, who wanted to serve Him and His ministry in their own particular way.

This Gospel passage tells us nothing about Mary’s inclination to serve, or her plans for ensuring that Jesus and His disciples had something to eat when they visited her and Martha. What it does tell us is that in the midst of a busy life and a full agenda, Mary chose to come apart from her duties to spend time listening to and talking with Jesus. No doubt I am sure, she was just as fully conscious of all that needed to be done as was Martha, but she undoubtedly was also conscious of how important and essential is Jesus’ life and teaching. Mary knew Jesus needed company that day. He did not need a housekeeper but someone who would just spend time with Him, be with Him, and listen to Him – just like our friend who came for dinner.

The story of Jesus, Mary and Martha challenges our priorities so that we come to see that fellowship with the Lord, being with the Lord, and hearing His Word should always precede the work we do for the Lord. If we don’t spend time with the Lord, how can we know what He wants us to do? Recall what Jesus said, “*Only one thing is necessary! Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.*”

In order to enter into service with the Lord, we must first have a relationship with the Lord. Do you have a routine, a program of developing your relationship with the Lord daily? Many people fulfill this by taking part each day in the Eucharist where they can also hear the Word of God. Others schedule a quiet time when they can pray and read the Word of God. In our modern-day society, when everything is held in a constant fast-forward-mode, how many times have we disregarded the Lord’s

invitation – our Lord’s standing invitation to “come away by ourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile”?

What do you want from a Sunday Homily? ...“A message that links the Scripture of the day to my life here and now.” Okay then, how many of you are aware that there is a flag pole (as a matter of fact, two flag poles) on our church grounds? One is by the Boy Scout Hut and another is right in front of the church, in the parking lot. How many of you are aware that the flag is at “Half-Staff”? In many countries, including the United States of America, that is a sign of respect, mourning, and/or distress. Our flag is currently flying at half-staff for the latter two reasons...mourning and distress. On the morning of June 13th, I personally lowered our flag to half-staff as a sign of mourning for the killings that happened over that weekend in Orlando, Florida. I figured that I would let it fly at half-staff for about three or four days. Thirty-five days later, our flag is still at half-staff.

Over the last thirty-five days, our streets, our communities, our neighborhoods, our country, and our world have been hit, back-to-back-to-back with mass shootings, massacres and carnage. So-called “peaceful protests” and demonstrations suddenly turned into violence. There are more mass shootings in the U.S. than in any other country in the world...in places like Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Falcon Heights, Minnesota; and Dallas, Texas. Some of us are afraid to step out of our homes; afraid to step into our streets; afraid that we will be the next victim. And let us not forget this past Thursday in Nice, France where over 80 people were killed in a horrific terrorist attack on innocent citizens enjoying the festivities of a National Holiday. When is this going to end? It will end only when we take ownership of the situation. It will end only when we realize that we are all brothers and sisters – and as brothers and sisters, we must come together in prayer. Regardless of what deity in whom we profess our faith, it is time for us to get down on our knees and pray for understanding, tolerance and peace.

Holy Father Pope Francis, in his statement about these killings said, *“We all hope that ways may be found, as soon as possible, to effectively identify and contrast the causes of such terrible and absurd violence which so deeply upsets the desire for peace of the American people and of the whole of humanity.”*

Through the Holy Eucharist, we are united with Christ. Christ is within us. We must honor the image of God that we see in one another. We must recognize that we are all brothers and sisters, sharing the same, brief moment on Earth and owing one another the loyalty and respect of (as the Holy Father said) our shared humanity.

Our hearts have turned cold as stone because of these events, but remember what the Lord told Ezekiel: *“I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh.”* That’s what each of us must pray for...a new heart...not a heart of stone, but a heart that is open to the fears and hopes and challenges that confront us...and we must pray for peace.

Jesus said, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”* Peace is directly connected to Jesus, the Giver of Peace, and the only way we can access that peace is through His presence. He extends an open invitation to, *“Come away with me to a deserted place and rest awhile.”* And while we are there, let us pray for America and for peace.

The world would be a better place if more people took hospitality as seriously as Abraham and Martha did. But where the Old Testament prizes hospitality above all other virtues and sees it as a sacred responsibility, the New Testament prizes one thing even more: the urgency of prayer and the Gospel. Doing the work of the Lord is great. But knowing the Lord of the work must always come first.

In the midst of our worry-filled world, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, appears and offers us new life – the life of the Spirit of God. But this new life requires us to spend a few moments a day in the presence of God when we can listen to His voice in the midst of our many concerns.

When Jesus visits someone, it is to give that person a gift, the most beautiful one there is: the gift of His love, the gift of His grace, the source of eternal life! And so my brothers and sisters, when we approach the Lord's table to receive Him in the Eucharist, to receive the gift the Lord has to offer, let us do so with fullness of heart...with fullness of faith...with fullness of love! This is what Mary and Martha did when they received Jesus into their home. And as always, let us also ask Him to guide our thoughts, our feelings and our actions.

So, what about us; can we commit a few minutes each day of our busy life to read the Scriptures and pray? Just a few minutes? The Lord is inviting us. If you take up His invitation, I guarantee that you will find inner peace. Put that to the test. When you leave Mass this morning (before you run off to the Café for your coffee and donut, or before you rush off to Waffle House for their Sunday morning special), pause for a while in the Gathering Space. Listen to the noise, the chatter, the business, and then, step into the Blessed Sacrament Chapel for a transformation and feel the quiet, the calm, the serenity, and the peace, and spend some quiet time with Him.

What do you want from a Sunday homily? ...“A message that links the Scripture of the day to my life here and now.” I hope that I was able to do that for you this morning. We, like Mary and Martha, do have the freedom of choice; we can either choose each day to pause in His presence, or not. Like Mary, I hope that we will choose the better part. “*Come away with me to a deserted place and rest awhile.*”

The Lord is on watch. He is always near. The Lord is my Shepherd. I walk with no fear.

May God Bless each and every one of you.

