

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 17, 2016

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In *Saint Luke's Gospel* the story of Martha and Mary of Bethany follows the Parable of the Good Samaritan. That is a deliberate literary choice. Whenever St Luke introduces an incident that does not naturally flow from the preceding one, his connecting tissue is the phrase "now it came to pass." And Luke deliberately wanted to connect these stories. For just as the parable illustrates the love of one's neighbor so the incident at Bethany shows the love we are to show to Almighty God.

Most of our knowledge of the family at Bethany, the sisters with Lazarus their brother, comes from *St John's Gospel*. But the picture St Luke presents is consistent with what we get from St John. In both gospels Martha is the practical and active sister and Mary the one who sits "still in the house." We all know people of both dispositions. Perhaps we fit one of these descriptions or reveal from time to time both dispositions. When we go looking for birds there is a choice to make: go find them, or stay in one place and let them find you. Something in a birder wants to do *both*.

When the Lord came to visit, Martha was immediately aware of *logistics*. His visit was a problem to solve in terms of hospitality. Mary saw none of the problem but the splendid opportunity to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to what He had to say. Christian disciples are dedicated to solving the problem of hospitality. We spend a lifetime disciplining our souls so that the Lord when He chooses to visit will find a place prepared for Himself. But part of discipleship is cherishing the desire to stop everything and just sit at the feet of the Master and listen to Divine Wisdom.

Some of you have seen the framed color photo in the St Theresa Rectory showing the smiling Pope John Paul II being greeted on his arrival in Boston in 1979. Some of you remember the visit. The photo was taken on the tarmac at Logan Airport, you can see the huge *Aer Lingus* jet aircraft in the background. It is a reminder the Holy Father had flown to Boston directly from a visit to Ireland. The photo is also interesting because many of the people in it are recognizable. First Lady Rosalind Carter is there. Bishop Marcinkus, head of Vatican security, is there. And in the foreground is a young Father William Helmick, Cardinal Medeiros's secretary. Everyone is smiling except Fr Helmick! He is trying to open the way for the Holy

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Father to get to the automobile, or the microphone, or whatever it is that was next. Like Mary of Bethany everyone in Boston wanted to see and hear the Pope. But the visit of the Holy Father brought enormous logistical problems. A former cardinal's secretary can list those for you to this very day! Many people did see and hear the Holy Father. But it didn't happen by accident. The work of Martha also has a place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is important to remember that neither Martha nor Mary was doing anything *wrong* in the house at Bethany. When Our Lord said to Martha, "You are anxious and troubled about many things" He was not commenting on the "many things" but on Martha's being troubled and anxious. Martha's *attitude* was leading her to feel a lack of charity towards her sister.

Why blame Mary? Who wouldn't want to sit at the Lord's feet listening to Him? She is like all those people on the Logan Airport tarmac. But remember something else Jesus had taught. Once when people were indeed sitting at His feet listening, the Lord said "The greatest of you will be the *servant*." Mary had chosen "the good part" in listening to Christ. But Martha certainly had chosen "the good part" in the work in the kitchen! Had she done that as an offering to the Lord, and which was making it possible for her sister to hear Jesus teach, Martha would have avoided anxiety and the need to complain. In fact, imagine for a moment that Mary had suddenly offered to trade places with her sister. Might the Lord have said, "Let her stay in the kitchen. By serving Me as she is, Martha is with Me too."

Attitude is much of the interior battle being fought in each of us. We all have the capacity to bring peace to difficult situations, and to make miserable an otherwise happy and joyous occasion. Martha built anxiety and trouble when she had the opportunity of enjoying an absolutely stupendous and unprecedented event: Almighty God was spending an evening in her own house! And so the Lord, who loved this family at Bethany, and stayed with them often, gently offered a course correction.

Our discipleship means receiving that "good portion" of the Presence of Christ in our lives. It is "the one thing needful." Christ is the good part Who alone is worth

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seeking and for Whom to live. And we find Him where we can, at Mass or in the kitchen or in a social gathering, or when we are alone. Remember always that no place, *and no loving service*, ever escapes His notice.