

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fifth Sunday after Trinity
July 21, 2019

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Saint Luke puts the incident of Martha and Mary with Jesus immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan. There is a reason. The parable illustrates love of *neighbor*. The momentary personality clash of the sisters shows the love we are to show *Almighty God*. We'll consider how this is so. By placing these events together Luke shows both points of the "summary of the law." And by the way, the phrase "now it came to pass" is literary tissue. It is St Luke's way of connecting episodes when there is no natural flow from one to the next.

Most of our knowledge of the family at Bethany (Lazarus and his sisters) comes from St John's Gospel. But St Luke gives a picture in complete harmony with what we get from John. In both gospels Martha is the practical and active sister, and Mary is the contemplative who sits "still in the house." And the Lord Jesus accepts it all.

When the Lord came to visit, Martha was immediately aware of the logistics of the matter. His visit was a *problem* to be solved in terms of hospitality. By contrast, Mary saw none of the problem but all of the *opportunity* to sit at Jesus's feet and listen to what He had to say. We spend our lives doing both. Christian disciples are dedicated to solving the problem of "hospitality" in our souls. When the Lord chooses to visit, will He find in us a mansion prepared for Himself? Will there be a throne in our hearts ready for His residency? But there is also not one among us who does not cherish the opportunity 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 of Msgr Helmick in the St Theresa Rectory. It was taken at the arrival of Pope John Paul II on his visit to Boston in 1979. Many of you remember that visit and the heavy rain at the Mass on the Common. In the photo taken at Logan Airport, the Holy Father is in the center, and smiling at the greeting on the tarmac. The huge *Aer Lingus* jet aircraft is in the background. The Pope had flown directly from a visit to Ireland. In the photo you can recognize the then-current first lady, Rosalind Carter, and Bishop Marcinkus, head of the Vatican security. But in the foreground is Fr William Helmick, Cardinal Medeiros' secretary. In the photo, Fr Helmick is the only one not having a good time! He is trying to open the way for the Holy Father to get to the

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automobile or the microphone, or whatever was next on the tight schedule. Everyone in the photo, and everyone in Boston, no doubt, wanted to be like Mary of Bethany and just sit and listen to the Holy Father. But the papal visit brought enormous logistical problems (as a former cardinal's secretary will remind you to this very day!) So the work of Martha also has a place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

So here's the real verdict. 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 criticizing her work but her *attitude*. It was Martha's frame of mind which led to her feeling a lack of charity towards her sister. Why blame Mary? Who wouldn't want to sit at the Lord's feet listening to Him? But remember when people were sitting at His feet, one of the things Jesus taught was "the greatest of you will be the *servant*." If Mary had chosen the "good part" in listening to Christ, Martha also certainly chose the good part in *the work she was doing in the kitchen!* Had she done that work without the bad attitude, she would have avoided anxiety and the need to complain. We might even imagine a scenario where Mary got up to trade places with Martha so her sister could also listen the Jesus. And the Lord would 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 ability to make miserable an otherwise happy and joyous occasion. As well, we have the capacity to bring peace to a difficult time. Martha was building anxiety and trouble when she had the opportunity to enjoy the fact Almighty God was under her roof and spending the evening in her own house! So the Lord gently offered a course correction to a soul He loved.

Our discipleship means receiving that "good portion" of the Presence of Christ in our own lives. That is "the one thing needful." Christ is the good part Who alone is worth seeking and for Whom we live. And we must find Him where we can, whether in the kitchen or in the parlor, or on the Logan Airport tarmac, or when we are alone. And remember, *no place, and no loving service*, escapes His notice.