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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
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The Sixteenth Sunday of the Year (C)

Friendship is a great gift and is filled with wonder. Each of us has within us the great desire for friendship, for companionship, and our Lord, too, sought friendship. Indeed, he seeks it from us still: "No longer do I call you servants," he says, "for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends" (John 15:15).

What must it have been like for Mary and Martha and Lazarus to be friends with Jesus? Have you ever wondered? How did they come to befriend Jesus? They lived in Bethany; Jesus lived briefly in Bethlehem and then in Nazareth. Together with Mary and Joseph he certainly would have visited Jerusalem each year, but how did he connect with these three? Were they relatives? Did their parents know Joachim and Ann, or even Joseph's parents? I wonder about this, and I marvel at the gift of friendship with Jesus.

It is very likely that Jesus chose to be friends with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and not the other way around. Why? Because he says: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Simply consider it for a moment: to be chosen by Jesus to be his friend, to be his companion, to be his disciple. As Jesus chose Mary, Martha and Lazarus to be his friends so he chooses each of

us. This truly is a humbling gift if we consider it even for a moment.

Why would Jesus choose to be friends with us? He chooses us because he loves us.

He loves us, not because we are especially good, particularly virtuous, or of any great merit, not because we are useful or even necessary to him; he loves us not, because we are good, but because *he* is good. He loves us, although we have nothing to offer him; he loves us, even in the ragged raiment of the prodigal son, who is no longer wearing anything lovable.¹

This is the great wonder of friendship with the One who "is love" (I John 4:16). His friendship is not like our own.

Why did the Lord befriend Mary and Martha and Lazarus? He befriended them because they knew that he loved them - they had heard his words and seen the works he performed - and they "welcomed him" (Luke 10:38). Like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, "Jesus himself drew near" to the three and they said to him, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent" (Luke 24:15, 28). Like Abraham who welcomed the three strangers and put himself at their service, they said to Jesus, "Sir, if I may ask you this favor, please do not go on past your servant. Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest" (Genesis 18:3-4).

¹ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *What It Means to Be a Christian: Three Sermons*. Henry Taylor, trans. (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2006), 69.

As the Lord draws near to us, what is our response? He draws near to us in the Scriptures when they read and whenever they are proclaimed in the Church. He draws near to us in the person of his bishops, priests and deacons. He draws near to us when the faithful gather together in his name. He draws near to us in the sacraments, especially in the Holy Eucharist. He draws near to us as friend.

When he quietly draws near and speaks to us, when he stands before us, beside us and even within us, how do we respond? Do we recognize his presence and place ourselves at his service? Do we listen intently and eagerly to his words? Or do we simply keep walking by in the vain attempt to ignore his call to friendship? Do we truly know who it is who asks our friendship and seeks it out even to the point of giving his life on the Cross?

Martha and Mary offer their love each in their own way. Martha follows the way of Sarah, seeing to the duties of hospitality and being "burdened with much serving" (Luke 10:40). Mary followed the way of Paul "to whom God chose to make known the riches of his glory" (Colossians 1:27). The Lord says that "Mary has chosen the better part" - not that Martha has chosen poorly - "and it will not be taken from her" (Luke 10:42). What does this mean?

Christ Jesus humbled himself and took on our flesh; he humbled himself and became hungry and thirsty as we are (cf. Philippians 2:5-7). The Lord humbled himself to be fed by us whom he came to feed with his own Body and Blood.

With deep concern, [Martha] prepared what the Holy of Holies and his saints would eat and drink in her house. It was an important but transitory work. It will not always be necessary to eat and drink, will it? When we cling to the most pure and perfect Goodness, serving will not be a necessity.²

If we are to fault Martha at all, we ought to fault her not because she demonstrated her love through service, but because she failed to follow Paul's words: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake" (Colossians 1:24).

Amidst the burdens and distractions of serving, Martha complained to the Lord rather than uniting her sufferings with his; but perhaps this is because the Lord had not yet suffered. Remember that at the death of her brother Lazarus it was Martha who said to Jesus, "And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you" (John 11:22). "Martha's love was more fervent than Mary's, for before [Jesus] had arrived there, she was ready to serve him."³

As Martha was busy feeding Jesus Mary was busy eating was Jesus offered. Saint Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall

² Saint Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 252.2 in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament III: Luke. Arthur A. Just, Jr., ed., et al. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 182.

³ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron* 8.15 in *Ibid.*, 183.

we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Like Jeremiah who devoured the scroll and found the words he ate to be "a joy and the delight of my heart" (Jeremiah 15:16), Mary knew that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). She placed herself at his feet, ready to listen, to learn, to follow and to eat the words he spoke.

Jesus himself is the food, the bread, we need for our pilgrim journey. This is why he gives himself to us in word and sacrament to strengthen us on our way. This is why we sing praise to him, because without his nourishment we could never make the journey.

At present alleluia is for us a traveler's song, but this tiresome journey brings us closer to home and rest where, all our busy activities over and done with, the only thing that will remain will be alleluia. That is the delightful part that Mary chose for herself, as she sat doing nothing but learning and praising, while her sister, Martha, was busy with all sorts of things. Indeed, what [Martha] was doing was necessary, but wasn't going to last.⁴

Let us then, with Mary, chose "the better part" that will not be taken away from us (Luke 10:42).

To cling always to God and to the things of God - this must be our major effort, this must be the road that the heart follows unswervingly. Any diversion, however impressive, must be regarded as secondary, low-grade and certainly dangerous.⁵

⁴ Saint Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 255.1-2, in Ibid., 183.

⁵ Saint John Cassian, Conference 1.8 in Ibid.

Let us listen intently to the Lord each day, to be friends with him, so that we might live in the presence of the Lord forever.
Amen.