

A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

My own family is pretty much a seashore family. My parent's families each had a seashore bungalow and actually that is where my parents met, in Seaside Heights in the 1920's. In the early 1950's with both of those homes sold my family began to rent for a week in Ship Bottom, New Jersey. I was a little kid. Eventually that week became two and finally the month of August. In 1966, we purchased a small, two-bedroom bungalow on a 100 X 100 foot lot. We kept that for five years, sold it and kept the back lot and there built our seashore home. That was 1971. From then on my mother would be down the shore from the middle of June when school got out until Labor Day.

We all loved the shore. However, there were rules. No sand in the beds. To make sure there was no sand in the beds there would be no sand allowed in the house. As you came from the beach you were met with the dust brush at the back door and told to hose yourself off outside. You showered in the outdoor shower and made sure you had your clothes with you and you hung up your towel and bathing suit. We had a washer but no dryer. That was why God invented clothes lines. And there was a right way and a wrong way to hang things on the clothes line. People checked out your clothes line; it revealed things about you and your family. At least that is what we were told.

Dinner was promptly at 5:30PM. So you had to be off the beach by 4:30. Period. No exceptions. At 5 o'clock, there were drinks and hors d'oeuvres beforehand and a full sit down dinner every Saturday and Sunday night. The dinners were wonderful and often raucous affairs but always within the limits set by my mother. I go into all of this because of the gospel reading for today. My mother was a Martha. She was proud she was a Martha. She had little time for and no use for the Mary's of this world. She simply saw them as the "lazy ones" and there was no place for that in her life or her home—no matter what Jesus said.

But the demands of hospitality took a toll on her. While family and guests were regaling themselves on the front porch she was slaving in the hot kitchen. That was her choice mind you but it took its toll. Sometimes there were explosions, not on the stove but in the chef.

When she finally got to heaven I would have paid big bucks to hear her conversation with the Good Lord about his Martha and Mary story. I know that she fully intended to give the Lord a piece of her mind about the unfairness of his words. However, now that she is gone these last 8 years I have done some reflecting and I have come to realize that as she got older she went through a transformation. When she was younger she would go to the shore in the afternoon but around three she would leave to go home and get started on dinner. As she grew older she stopped going to the beach at all. She started on dinner right after lunch. But she got everything prepared. Then she would sit on the glider on the front porch and pray her rosary. When we got back from the beach she was no longer frazzled. Everything was ready and simply had to be put out. She would be with us on the front porch and able to join in the festivities and the story-telling and the laughter.

I go into all of this to make a very simple point. My mother was Martha. But my mother became Mary. Over time. She found a way to do both things. To prepare and serve, in a spirit of hospitality and also to be present to family and friends, listening and laughing and drinking in the shared experiences and the flow of love in and through the words. I go into all this because sometimes I think that we think that Martha and Mary are two different people when actually the deeper truth is that they are two different sides that we each have. We each have the doer side to us; we also have the listener, being present side to us. But they are not the same and they are not equal. And often, as in my mother's case, the lesser side has to be cultivated—over time--to bring out the fullness of us as persons. I believe that happened in my mom and I believe it happens in us but we have to want it and recognize what is missing in our lives and we have to choose to remedy it and we have to ask the Lord for his help and we have to pray.

Why is hospitality and the spirit of hospitality so important to us as human beings? Because it is important to our God. It is the way we are made. What is the underlying dynamic in hospitality? If I can create a space where you can enter and your needs are met and you are truly welcome and loved and accepted, then in that atmosphere you will relax, you will begin to blossom. You will open up. You will share your very self. Your love will flow freely. And in that very atmosphere and in that very moment, I, who am with you, will be enriched by your presence and your love. There is this very reciprocal dimension to hospitality and both dimensions of it are essential. My mother grew to recognize this simple truth and she grew to realized that although she was inclined to the Martha part she also had a little bit of Mary in her and she made decisions and accommodations to make sure both were fed. In short, she found a way.

Over the last several months in meetings with parishioners who recently lost loved ones in death, two different families told a similar story. One at the hospital in the room of their dying loved one and one outside the bedroom of their loved ones, they mentioned how all those in the room began to tell stories of the person. Some were funny and there was great laughter. Some were sad or poignant and there were tears. All said how beautiful it was to tell the stories and feel the love. It was very satisfying as a human experience. It nourished them. I mentioned to each family and also in my funeral homily that what they were experiencing was Eucharist. The Lord was there (where two or three gather in my name I am there), the stories were told, the love was shared and people were nourished by the experience. That is Eucharist. It's just that we are more familiar with it here at Church than we are in other circumstances. But it is Eucharist nonetheless.

Summertime hospitality is a big thing and part of many lives. But it can sometimes become oppressive, laden down with pretty heavy expectations. I share with you a smidgeon of wisdom that I found in my own experiences and in my own mother who struggled to get right all the elements of hospitality. But she did. And so we shall—with the Lord's help. He was waited on and served in Martha's home. But now it is we who are invited to his home and to his table and he feeds us and waits on us in this celebration of the Eucharist. Let us rejoice and be glad. May we blossom in his presence.