

The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 18:1-10A
<i>Response</i>	He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 5
<i>Second Reading</i>	Colossians 1:24-28
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are they who have kept the word with a generous heart and yield a harvest through perseverance.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 10:38-42

The 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time brings us to one of the passages in the Gospel of Luke that is a favorite for many people. It's the famous story of Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary. This is one of those gospel passages that's unique to Luke. We only have it in the Gospel of Luke. If we didn't have Luke, we wouldn't know about the famous story of Martha serving and Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus. So we're going to read this gospel, it's in Luke 10:38-42, we'll try to unpack it and look at how it relates to the earlier passages from the Old Testament and the psalm for today's readings. So without any further ado, in Luke 10:38 we read these words:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."¹

End of the gospel there. Ok, there are a lot of things going on in this particular text. First of all, the characters of Martha and Mary, although this particular story only

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

appears in the Gospel of Luke, the figures of Martha and Mary (these 2 sisters) also appear in the Gospel of John in the famous story of the resurrection of Lazarus, where we see, once again, Jesus going into the home of Lazarus his friend — it says that he loved them, they were close — he was the brother of Martha and Mary. So these 2 sisters appear in the Gospel of John as well. So this isn't the only time Jesus dines in their home and takes refreshment in their home. And so the first thing I would just say about this is, it gives us an interesting window into the figure of these various female followers of Jesus. They aren't members of the Twelve. They're not members of the Twelve Apostles, obviously. They are not even members of the chosen seventy disciples that we see earlier in the Gospel of Luke, and yet they are obviously very close to Jesus. They travel around with him. Luke tells us in chapter 8 about how some of his female followers provided for him out of their means, and Martha and Mary appear to be in this kind of close circle of disciples of Jesus, friends of Jesus, in who's home he would dine on occasion. So in this case, he's being received into Martha's home.

Another element here that is worth pointing out is that (just by way of corrective) sometimes people will say that in the 1st Century AD there could be no interaction between men and women within ancient Jewish culture. There are reasons people will say that based on some later traditions from the 5th, 6th and 7th Century in the Jewish Talmud, but the fact of the matter is if we look at the gospels, Jesus interacts with women (especially with his female followers and female friends) on a pretty regular basis without anyone expressing any concern or surprise at how unique this is. But one example where there is a case of surprise is when Jesus interacts with the Samaritan woman in John 4. So that's a little bit of a unique situation because it is a Jew and a Samaritan interacting there. Here we see Jesus, a Jew, interacting with Martha and Mary, who are Jewish women, and there doesn't seem to be any surprise or occasion for scandal or questions about it. So I just throw that out just as an important corrective. It's helpful to keep in mind that, sometimes, some of the rules of separation in men and women that people assume were enforced in the 1st Century A.D., don't appear to be enforced in the actual gospel text. So in this case, what we have is Martha, who appears to be the householder, because it's called "her house", is receiving Jesus into her home, and in ancient Jewish society, in 1st Century Jewish society as well as in Contemporary Mediterranean society and in many different cultures, the virtue of hospitality to a visitor or a stranger, much less a family or friend who's coming over to stay in your home, is extremely important, it's very highly valued.

So in this case, Jesus enters the village in which Martha's home is, and so she receives him into her house. She's practicing hospitality and, in the 1st Century as to day, one of the important things about hospitality is that when you have a guest coming over to stay, you will serve them, usually in the form of a dinner, food or drink, or whatnot. So you can see that when Martha received Jesus into her house, she begins focusing on serving him, and the Greek word there for service is *diakonia*. We actually get the word *diakonos* from that, or deacon. It's just a word for ministry or service. And just like in the book of Acts, where Peter and the Apostles talk about how they are too busy to focus on "serving at table"; in other words, providing food for members of the community that need some assistance, some charitable assistance, so too here, Martha seems to be primarily engaged in providing food for Jesus. In other words, serving up a dinner for her guests. So while she's busy doing that, her sister Mary, by contrast, is not helping her prepare the meal. Instead, what is she doing? It says she's "sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his teaching". So this leads to Jesus giving Martha a kind of gentle rebuke and also one of his most famous teachings. Martha comes to Jesus and says "Lord, don't you care that my sister isn't helping me, that she's left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me!" Jesus responds by saying "Martha, you're anxious about many things and there's only thing necessary, and that Mary has chosen the better portion, or the good portion, and it's not going to be taken from her."

Now what is going on exactly in this story? Most people, I think, and most homilies I've heard on this, will focus on Martha and Mary as kind of symbols for two aspects of the spiritual life. Activity, who would be represented by Martha, who's serving, who's doing something; and then contemplation, which is symbolized by Mary, who's simply sitting and receiving and listening to the Lord. And as we will see in a minute when we get to the living tradition, that's a very, very ancient interpretation. It goes all the way back to the 3rd Century A.D. with the writings of Origen of Alexandria, who is the most prolific Bible commentator among the early Church Fathers in the 3rd Century A.D., before the time of Saint Jerome. So it's a very ancient interpretation and I don't want to deny that interpretation. However, it's important that we be precise here about exactly what's going on because sometimes people will say, "Well Jesus rebukes Martha for being too active and he approves Mary for being contemplative", but there's a little bit more going on there if you look exactly what he says here.

So notice, if you read the verse carefully here, it says "Martha was distracted with much serving" and when he responds to Martha's demand that he get Mary to help

her, notice what Jesus says: “You are anxious and troubled about many things.” So if you look at the text carefully, you’ll notice that both Luke’s description and Jesus’ response actually put the emphasis not just on Martha’s serving, but on the fact that she’s distracted by her serving. So if you look at the Greek word there, Luke says she was “distracted by much service.” The Greek word is *perispaō*, it literally means “pulled away”. So if you’ve ever been distracted you know what that does. Maybe you have an iPhone, or you’ve seen a young person on the phone and you say “they’re being distracted”, why? Well because they are in a particular situation but the phone is pulling them away from the present and distracting them with something else. That’s actually what the Greek word *perispaō* means, something is pulling you away from something else, it’s distracting you. So twice Mary is described as being distracted and the second word that the text emphasizes is that she is “anxious.” Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious about many things.” The Greek word there, *merimnaō*, is from the word “to remember”, so she has a lot on her mind. So she’s distracted, and she’s anxious, or worried, or fretful about many different things. But Jesus says to her, “There’s only one thing that’s actually necessary or one thing that’s needed, and Mary has chosen it”. So whenever you look at this terminology here, it should actually call to mind Jesus’ teaching elsewhere in the gospel when he tells Martha not to be anxious. He uses the same word that occurs in Luke 12:22 when he says to the disciples:

And he said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on.

Then he goes again to give his famous examples of “consider the lilies of the field, they don’t toil or spin but they’re clothed more gloriously than Solomon”, or “consider the birds of the air, they don’t work but your father feeds them”. So he’s saying don’t be anxious and don’t be of an anxious mind, but seek first the kingdom of Heaven. That’s from Luke 12:22-31.

So the focus of Jesus’ response to Martha’s demand that Mary help her is actually to correct her for two things: First, she’s distracted with her service. It’s not just that she’s serving, it’s that the service is pulling her away from something else. And second, that she’s anxious about earthly things, like preparing a meal for Jesus. So in this case here, it’s the service that Martha’s providing that is leading her to two problems: namely to be distracted and to be worried or to be anxious, and that’s what Jesus (so-to-speak) rebukes her for. So that’s Martha on the one hand. She’s anxious and distracted by her service, by her activity. What about Mary?

Well, if we look at Mary, we learn a few other things. Unlike Martha, Mary is not described as being the owner of the house. Notice it says that Jesus was received into Martha's house. So Martha owns the home, but Mary her sister apparently lives with her, and in this case Mary is simply described with one phrase: "She sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching." So what's going on here? Well this is one of those times where a 1st Century Jewish background really helps us, because sitting at someone's feet is a Jewish way of describing the posture or the position of a disciple to their master. The best example of this is from Acts 22. If you look at Acts 22:3, St. Paul is describing his previous history, his previous life before his conversion, and he says this:

"I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cili'cia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gama'li-el, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers"

Now what does that mean? It doesn't literally mean that when St. Paul was born he was put at Gama'li-el's feet and that Gama'li-el was his dad and he raised him. No, he is describing the fact that he was a student of rabbi Gama'li-el, who was one of the most famous rabbis of the 1st Century A.D. He's actually mentioned in the later collection of Jewish traditions (that I've got right here) called the Mishnah. This was compiled about 200 A.D., but it has traditions that go back all the way to the 1st Century A.D. And one of the famous rabbis repeatedly mentioned in the Mishnah is rabbi Gama'li-el. So in Acts 22, Paul is saying, when he says "I was raised at the feet of Gama'li-el", what he means is "I was a student of Gama'li-el, I was a disciple and he was the master." So when Mary sits at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching, she's taking a posture of a disciple and Jesus is the master. That's the imagery there. And if you have any doubts about this, there's actually a treatise in the Mishnah called *Aboth*. This is like the saying of various fathers (*Aboth* literally means the fathers of these different rabbis). Ok, so in this treatise *Aboth* 1:4 it actually says this, using the same image about the importance of learning from a rabbi and it says:

Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and *sit amid the dust of their feet* and drink in their words with thirst.²

So there you go. What did the rabbi say? One of their pieces of wisdom was that your house should be a place that's frequented by wise men, by sages. And when

² Mishnah, *Aboth* 1:4; trans. H. Danby

they come into your house, what are you supposed to do? Sit in the dust of their feet in order to drink in their teachings. That's almost a precise parallel with what we see being described here in the Gospel of Luke. Just as the later rabbis encouraged young disciples to sit at the feet of rabbis when they would come into their home, so too Mary here is taking the position of a disciple and sitting at Jesus' feet in Martha's house and listening to his teaching. So whereas Martha represents service, activity, Mary represents discipleship and listening to the teaching of Jesus. That would have been, in a 1st Century Jewish context...the virtues that they emblemize, if you have to kind of boil it down, it is that Martha represents hospitality, and Mary represents discipleship. See the difference there, it's an important distinction. And so in that context, Jesus responds to Martha's demand that Mary assist her by saying "Martha, Martha, you're anxious about many things", in other words, you're anxious about showing me hospitality in an earthly way, providing me food and drink and refreshment, but Mary has chosen the good portion, which is to take the posture of a disciple, to listen to my teachings. And that's exactly what the Greek says, Jesus says, "there's one thing needful or one thing necessary and Mary has chosen the good portion."

The Greek is *tēn agathēn merida*. I think the New American Bible translates that as "the better portion" or "the better part". Some translations will translate it that way, but the Greek literally just says the "good portion", but the connotation of it is the "better or the best portion." For example, like when we cut a pie and my kids say "I want the good piece or I want the big piece." They want a portion of the pie, but they want the biggest chunk, they want the best slice, so to speak. The same thing's true here. The good portion refers to the better part. What is the better part? Well, hospitality is good, but discipleship is better. Hospitality is a good in itself, service is good. Jesus isn't denigrating that, but to sit at his feet and be his disciple is the better portion, it's the better part, and Mary has chosen that better portion and that's not going to be taken away from her. That's the basic thrust and the meaning of the passage in its 1st Century Jewish context.

So, with those two things in mind: hospitality and discipleship, now let's go back to the Old Testament reading and see if we can figure out why it was chosen for today and what the implications are for this reading. So in this case, the lectionary takes us back to Genesis 18. It is a very famous story of Abraham and the three mysterious men who show up at his tent (this is Genesis 18:1-10). I'm just going to read the passage and then we'll unpack it:

And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, “My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I fetch a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes.” And Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds, and milk, and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” The Lord said, “I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.”

That’s the end of the passage in the lectionary. Now if you know the story, it keeps going and Sarah laughs and there’s a whole exchange there, but we have here the promise of the birth of Isaac. Alright, so what do we make of this story? There are a couple of things to highlight. First, this is one of the most famous theophanies in the Old Testament. I’ve probably mentioned this before but a theophany is a contemporary term that just means “an appearance of God”. *Theos* is the word for God, *phainō* means “to appear”. So a “theophany” is when “God appears.” And in this case, it’s one of those interesting times in the Old Testament where it’s a little mysterious, it’s a little ambiguous about exactly who is appearing. So on the one hand, it says that “the Lord” appeared to Abraham — and the Hebrew word there for the Lord is YHWH, it’s the sacred name of God. The tetragrammaton is what it’s called, the sacred four letters. But on the other hand, the text also says that there were three men that appeared to Abraham. And so in ancient times, this set the minds of interpreters running to try to figure out exactly who is appearing here. Is it just God with two men? Is it God with two angels? Is it three angels and one of them speaks as the Lord? There’s a kind of mystery associated with this theophany. In the later Christian tradition it came to be associated with one of the first types of the Trinity, these three men who appeared to Abraham. So if you ask, “Well, does God appear?” The answer is yes. Well how many persons appear? Well it’s three. You can see why ancient Christians interpreters would see that as a kind

of foreshadowing or a hint of the mystery of the Trinity: One God in three persons. You'll even see there are a number of icons that will be Trinitarian in context which will have three angels or three persons dining with Abraham near the oaks of Mamre, near Abraham's tent. So it's kind of a famous episode.

In this case though, what the lectionary is focusing on, I think in terms of its choice of this passage, is Abraham and Sarah's act of hospitality to their mysterious guests. So just as Martha in the gospel was busy preparing a meal to serve Jesus, her guest, so too now, you'll notice Abraham says, "my lord, do not pass by your servant." Abraham also offers service to his guests. He offers hospitality and he goes and tells Sarah, "You prepare the bread (take some meal and prepare the bread). I'm going to go and prepare the meat, I'll get a lamb ready and we're going to give a feast. We're going to give a meal to our three guests." Well you can pick up on the fact that in some way, Abraham recognizes that these mysterious guests are worthy of his honor because he calls him "my lord" there. So Abraham and Sarah provide food and shelter and refreshment to their guests and in response, what does the Lord do? He speaks a word to Abraham. He gives a revelation to Abraham that in the spring, Sarah is going to finally bear a child. Now this is a really important revelation given the fact that Abraham has been in the Promised Land for a long time, for years in fact, over a decade, and the Lord had told him one day he would have a son, but they still haven't had a child. In this case, God gives a specific timeline: in the Spring you're going to have a son. That son is going to be Isaac and he's going to carry on the blessing that was promised to Abraham when God called him out of Ur of Chaldea to come to the Promised Land. So here we have...near the oaks of Mamre by the way, which is kind of a sacred site in Abraham's life. In other passages in Genesis he built an altar there near the oak tree at Mamre, and then also when Sarah eventually dies she'll be buried in a cave near the oaks of Mamre. So this is a sacred place, it's a holy place, and in this holy place near this sacred oak tree, God comes to Abraham near his tent, reveals to him that he is going to have Isaac as a son.

So we see the parallels there. Just as Abraham gives hospitality to the Lord God and receives this revelation about the birth of Isaac, so in the New Testament Martha gives hospitality to Jesus. So notice the parallel between Jesus and the Lord in the Old Testament, and then Jesus responds here not so much with a prophecy about the future, but with a revelation in the sense that he's revealing to her that Mary has chosen the better portion by taking the role of a disciple. So hospitality is good, just like Abraham showed, but there's something even greater and that's dis-

ipleship to Jesus Christ, being a disciple of the Lord. Which by the way, that just made me realize, isn't it interesting that in Luke's gospel when he narrates Jesus' response to Martha, he says "the Lord said to her", which would be *kurios* in Greek (this is just occurring to me), and then if you go back to the Greek Old Testament, the translation of the Tetragrammaton is *kurios*. And Luke doesn't always call Jesus the Lord, he frequently just calls him Jesus ("Jesus, Jesus, Jesus"). So in this case, you have to wonder if he maybe uses the language of the Lord even as an echo of these Old Testament theophanies (in this case, perhaps, the Old Testament theophany to Abraham). It's just a suggestion, but it's interesting given the parallel between the two texts and the lectionary.

So with that Old Testament and New Testament background in mind, if you look at the psalm for today, it's kind of a general psalm, it's a bridge between the Old and New Testament. It's Psalm 15. It's a very brief psalm that emphasizes the importance of living according to the law of God, of following the Lord's commandments. So in Psalm 15:1 it says:

O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent?
Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?

He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right,
and speaks truth from his heart;

who does not slander with his tongue,
and does no evil to his friend,
nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;

in whose eyes a reprobate is despised,
but who honors those who fear the Lord;
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;

who does not put out his money at interest,
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.

He who does these things shall never be moved.

Now you notice there, I included the opening verse for the psalm because in this case, it's inverting the image of hospitality. So in the Old Testament reading, the Lord comes to dwell in Abraham's tent or in the New Testament, the Lord Jesus comes to dwell in Martha's house. But now, the psalm says, "Who's going to dwell

in your tent?” In other words, “How am I going to get to dwell in the tent of the Lord? How will I get to receive the hospitality of God (so to speak) by being welcomed into his tent?” Which by the way, in the Jewish mindset, would be the Tabernacle. Where is God’s house? Where is his tent? It’s the Tabernacle. Where is his house? It’s the Temple. So how can I be welcomed into the Lord’s house? How can I receive hospitality from him? Well, by walking blamelessly and by doing what is right. So living a life of righteousness and justice will enable me to enter into the Lord’s house for him to show hospitality to me. So that’s the bridge here between the Old Testament and the New Testament, because ultimately salvation is going to be depicted like eternal hospitality on God’s part, where God will welcome us into his house forever and ever and ever; think here of the Gospel of John:

In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

That’s in John 14:1-3. So this theme of hospitality and being received into one’s home is very, very much the message of today. It’s kind of the central theme that runs through the Old Testament, the psalm and New Testament like a golden thread.

Ok, so with all that in mind then, what does the living tradition have to show us? How has the gospel text for today been interpreted in the tradition? And here I am going to quote from two main figures. The first I’ve already mentioned. Origen of Alexandria is the earliest of the Church Fathers in the 3rd Century to give us what approximates a commentary on the Gospel of Luke. So we’re working through Luke this year. In the 3rd Century Origen has some homilies on Luke. We don’t have all of the homilies, but they’re an excellent example of how the gospel was being interpreted in Egypt in the 3rd Century A.D. by one of the leading Church Fathers of his day. And although he’s not considered a saint in the tradition, he’s frequently quoted in the Catechism as an example of the ancient Christian tradition. And this is what Origen has to say about Martha and Mary.

“You might reasonably take Martha to stand for action and Mary for contemplation. For, the mystery of love is lost to the active life unless one directs his teaching, and his exhortation to action, toward contemplation. For, there is no action without contemplation, or contemplation without action.”³

³ Origen, *Fragments on the Gospel of Luke* 171; trans. Joseph T. Lienhard

So here, what Origen's basically talking about is two dimensions of the spiritual life. He sees Martha and Mary as symbolic. This is the kind of allegorical exegesis of the passage, which in Ancient Egypt (and especially in Alexandria), allegorical exegesis or allegorical interpretations are very popular, to take what you see in the story and ask, "What does it symbolize? What virtues does it symbolize?" And In this case, Origen's saying that Martha symbolizes the active life. The fact that every Christian is called to engage in service, in love of neighbor, in doing things for God and for others. So that's why it says "the mystery of love" here is a part of the active life. On the other hand, Mary represents contemplation. So, contemplation is more focused on God and on pondering the mysteries of the truths of God. So we have activity ordered toward love of neighbor, contemplation, in a sense, ordered toward love of God, toward listening to God, toward pondering the truths of the faith, and what Origen is saying is that both of these aspects of the spiritual life are essential. You can't have actual Christian action, in other words, that's animated by the love of God if you don't live a life of contemplation. And, on the other hand, all contemplation (love of God) should ultimately be ordered toward love of neighbor. It should lead us not to just love the Lord and not love our neighbor, but to love our neighbor through what we learned from how God loves us. So it's just two dimensions of the spiritual life: contemplation and action.

And this is frequently played out in the history of tradition with the various charisms of different religious orders. So if you look at certain religious orders, like the Carmelite tradition (St. Teresa of Ávila, St. John of the Cross), they'll be described often as a contemplative order because their emphasis is going to be focused. The time that they spend is going to be put primarily into prayer, into contemplation. Same thing, there will be other orders, like the Jesuits or the Dominicans, which are missionary orders and orders of preaching that will be described as active orders, that are going to be out in the world proclaiming the gospel, whether from the pulpit or evangelizing peoples who have not yet heard the gospel. Now in both those cases, obviously, the contemplative and the active orders are supposed to be engaged in both. So you don't have true Christian action and missionary activity without contemplation, without prayer. And also, obviously, contemplative orders should also engage in the love of neighbor, whether the love of one another within their community, also the love of the poor, almsgiving, and care and concern for those around them. So you'll see that manifested in authentic expressions. There could be an emphasis of either one of these aspects of the spiritual life. Some religious orders look more like Martha, some look more like Mary, but they all have to have both. That's what Origen is saying here: that the mystery of love

(love of God, love of neighbor) involves both action and contemplation. And I think that this is a really important lesson, not just for consecrated religious orders, but for all of us.

So every Christian (and if you've heard homilies on this passage), most people will tend to identify with either Martha or Mary (just because we all have different temperaments). Some people might be more inclined to contemplation and other people might be more inclined to action. It's frequently the case that you'll sometimes here people (I've noticed this) be a little, shall we say, put off by the fact that Jesus rebukes Martha. Because let's say you are a person who is more inclined to action. Maybe you're a choleric and you like to get things done and you recognize that service is important and people have to eat and houses have to get cleaned. You can sometimes be a little put off by the fact that Jesus rebukes Martha, but he doesn't rebuke Mary who's sitting at his feet and listening. And this why I think it's helpful to recognize that, although Origen's right about the symbolic application of active and contemplative, there's a dimension to Mary's action that Jesus is focusing on, and namely this: that her activity is animated and driven by anxiety and distraction. That's where the problem is. It's not in the service, it's in the way she's serving. She's filled with anxiety and she's distracted. Now what is she distracted from? If the Greek word means to be pulled away from, what is her service pulling her away from? Well it's pulling her away from Jesus. She's not focused on him. She's distracted from him, and in stark contrast to Mary who has her eyes set totally on Jesus. So, at least for me, I think it's been helpful to recognize that Jesus here isn't critiquing the active life *per se* (much less is he critiquing hospitality *per se*). We've seen that hospitality is a very fundamental virtue, it's a way of expressing love of neighbor that's important in cultures to this day. However, let's be honest with ourselves. Activity and service, taking care of daily and earthly duties, easily pulls us away from God. It can easily become an excuse for not engaging in contemplation. That's just a fact.

Maybe you're engaged in ministry at your church (I don't know what it might be), or maybe just in your own life, maybe you're a parent and you have lots of kids and you're a mother or father, you have young children or older children, maybe you have teenagers, whatever it might be; it's very easy (and I've heard this over and over again), "Well I'd love to pray, but I just don't have the time. I'm too busy." Right? "I'm too distracted with many things." Or, "when I try to pray, all I can think about is everything I have to do. All I can think about is the bills I have to pay, or what I have to do at work, or what's going on at the office, or what's go-

ing on at the school, or what's going on in my kid's lives." In other words, the legitimate concerns of earthly things become a distraction away from contemplation.

And so what Origen is telling us here, based on (of course) what Jesus said, is that the thing that's necessary to live the mystery of love, to live the life of love, is contemplation. Because if you're engaging in action and you're not focused on Christ, then that action is not going to be animated by the love of Christ, it's not going to be animated by the love of Jesus. So the one thing that's absolutely necessary is prayer (in other words), prayer and discipleship, following the Lord. And when that happens, all of the action will be ordered toward Christ, and also by the way, ordered toward contemplation, so that the prayer and the contemplation becomes the source of the strength that is necessary for engaging in the service (and the many services) that our duties or our state in life call us to. So I think St. Francis de Sales was the one who said this, I might be wrong about that, but I think he said something to the effect that, "At the bare minimum, pray 30 minutes. You need 30 minutes of contemplation and meditation each day, unless you're busy, then you need an hour." In other words, busyness doesn't mean you can pull back in prayer. It actually means you need to intensify it, you need to lengthen it, because you need those activities to be animated by a spirit of prayer. Otherwise, you're going to engage in them in a way that is anxious, not trusting in God, and filled with worry and anxiety. And Jesus tells us that's not how Christians are supposed to live. "Don't be anxious; seek first the kingdom and all these things will be given to you as well." That's what he says in Luke 12.

And so I'm going to give you one more quote here, this is from another church Father, this is St. Cyril of Alexandria. This is a book on St. Cyril, who was a 5th Century Church Father. He was a major figure in the Council of Ephesus. And, he was the first to write a full commentary on the Gospel of Luke. I have a two volume commentary here from St. Cyril on the Gospel of Luke, and this is what he said about the story of Martha and Mary:

Mary... sat at the Saviour's feet, and filled her heart with the doctrines He taught, feeling as if she could never have enough of what so profited her. For the Saviour lodged with the holy women, but Mary, it says, listened to Him as He taught; while the other, Martha, was distracted with much service... One of these women was steadfast in her love of learning: but Martha was distracted with much service. Does any one then blame her for being occupied with careful service? By no means. For neither does the

Saviour chide her for having proposed to herself the discharge of this duty; but rather He blamed her, as one who was laboring in vain, by wishing to procure more than was necessary. And He did this for our benefit, that He might fix a limit to hospitality. For far better is that other part, of earnestly desiring the divine doctrine.”⁴

So notice what Cyril was saying here, Jesus is not rebuking Martha for serving and fulfilling her duties. We have to fulfill our duties. It is part of God’s will for our life. What he is rebuking her for is trying to do too much, and in doing too much, giving into anxiety. Now, I don’t about you, but that’s a real challenge for me. And I think, as Americans in general, our culture is one of over-activism. We tend to do, to bite off more than we can chew, to try to do more than is actually possible or more than is actually necessary. And the end result is living in a constant state of anxiety and activity, and not just anxiety and activity, but over-activity. And we justify that over-activity by saying “well, I’m serving others, I’m doing my duties.” And so what St. Cyril is saying here is that Jesus’ words put a limit on the good of hospitality. In other words, we need to carry out our duties but we don’t need to overdo it and over commit in such a way that would lead us to neglect, what? Learning doctrine, learning the faith. Now I don’t know about you, but in my experience I can think of lots of cultures and families that put hospitality at a high priority. Showing hospitality to neighbors and friends and family is very, very important, whether at Christmas dinner, or Thanksgiving dinner, or having people over to visit, or whatever it might be. But how many of those same families think it’s even more important to learn the faith, to listen to the teachings of Jesus, to pay attention to the words of Christ, to go to mass every Sunday and hear the sacred doctrine of the gospels? Jesus said that one of those two things was essential and it wasn’t the service and it wasn’t the hospitality; it was learning from him. It was taking the posture of a disciple.

So how much time do you spend reading gospels? How much time do you spend meditating and praying, in other words, listening to the gospels? How much time do you spend talking about the faith with your family and with your friends? How much time do you time do spend teaching the faith to your children? That’s supposed to be priority number one. Everything else is good, all the other things are good, but this is the one thing necessary. And the same thing for those who are engaged in ministry as well. In particular, I know priests have extraordinary numbers

⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *Sermons on the Gospel of Luke* 69; trans. R. Payne Smith

of duties, especially diocesan priests at the parish level, thousands of families underneath their care; it is a very easy temptation to say I just don't have time to pray the liturgy of the hours, to do my daily meditation, to do a daily holy hour, whatever it might be. This gospel is the antidote to that kind of activism, that easy temptation to giving in to engaging in service and neglecting contemplation, or engaging in hospitality and neglecting study of sacred doctrine, the study of the faith. And we need to all (I think) be encouraged to be more like Mary, who had a...how did St. Cyril say it?...who felt as if "she could never have enough, and filled her heart with the doctrines he taught". And if you're watching *The Mass Readings Explained* you're probably already trying to do that. You're trying to learn more. But in this case, it's a corrective that we can all hear over and over again, that we always need to be reminded of, that there is one thing necessary, and that one thing necessary is to listen to Jesus and to sit at his feet, for him to be the master, for us to be the student and to let his words animate everything we do. Not just our prayer, not just our contemplation, but also our action and our service to others.