Feast of Mary and Martha of Bethany

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts bring us closer to the Divine.

The scene laid out for us in today’s Gospel is one we’ve seen many times before. This Gospel was read on Sunday only two weeks ago. And usually we focus on the difference between Martha -the “active” life – and Mary - the “contemplative” life – with the contemplative life being seen as the “better part.” - I remember, when I first spoke to my older sister about my desire to be a cloistered Carmelite Nun, she told me that I had been given the “higher” vocation, since she was only an “active” sister who taught grade school and I was being called to be a “contemplative.” She told me, in later years, how the distinction between the two had been emphasized in her formation in the convent. These “active” sisters were warned about spending too much time in solitude, and sisters who “meditated” too much were considered suspect in some way. Similarly, when I was preparing to enter the cloistered Carmelite community, I was reminded that they were not an “active” community and there were no ‘outside’ apostolates. I shouldn’t plan on teaching or doing any outreach beyond the monastery walls.

Emmaus came about because of the recognition that, to paraphrase desert monk Charles de Foucault, “if contemplative life is possible only in the desert or behind cloister walls, then we should all have a cloister garden or a tract of desert,” because we are all called to be contemplatives - right in the midst of the daily ups and downs of daily life.

Today we anticipate tomorrow’s feast of Mary and Martha of Bethany. The feast name itself helps us to the recognition that holiness and wholeness are most often about “both/and.” Both Mary AND Martha are to be celebrated – the one who serves and is busy about many things, and the one who sits in the Presence. – And in fact – each of us is called to be both.

But the lectionary readings and opening prayer steer us beyond this reading or interpretation of today’s gospel – or perhaps take us deeper into its meaning - in the direction of hospitality.

From the Collect: “your Son Jesus Christ enjoyed rest and refreshment in the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany.” He enjoyed their hospitality.

We are enjoined by the letter to the Romans: “Extend hospitality to strangers.”

Psalm 36 speaks of God’s hospitality:

“How priceless is your love, O God! \*  
your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings.

They feast upon the abundance of your house; \*  
you give them drink from the river of your delights.

In this context, we see today’s gospel as Mary and Martha providing *hospitality* to Jesus.

I found the following in a special issue of one of the Catholic Worker newsletters:

The English word "hospitality" is related to Latin word: (hospit, hospcs) meaning "the generous and cordial reception of guests.” The word' "hospital" is derived from the same root word for a "guest room"; and the Latin words for host and guest are related to the same root word. So hospitality has to do not only with "remembering to welcome strangers in your home" (Hebrews 13: 2), but with the relationship between host and guest.

Hospitality is one of the defining charisms of the Emmaus Community. From its inception, this community has focused on welcoming the stranger on the road. The Rule of St. Benedict directs us to “Receive each guest as Christ.”

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Real hospitality is about the relationship. Martha is a bit peeved at her sister not only because she has left work to be done, but perhaps because she has stepped outside the bounds of expected behavior and roles. A woman should not have been sitting with the guest. Martha provided the nitty gritty part of hospitality, but Mary provided the relationship. Mary attended to the person and the presence of Jesus. Again, remember that we are called to be both. Sometimes that means we leave the dishes for later while we sit and break the bread of our lives in conversation and silence with another. Sometimes it means we invite the other into the kitchen to help! Hospitality, then, is allowing another into our lives, and appreciating the Christ-presence of the other.

But finally this afternoon I’d like us to consider the hospitality of Jesus. No, it wasn’t his home or his food. But the hospitality he provided was in welcoming Mary to be the person she was, and in loving her just as she was. Jesus accepted Mary even as she stepped outside the role and position proscribed for her. He entered into relationship with her and welcomed her into his presence, his space.

In this Gospel story, then, as in all of Scripture, we are invited to recognize ourselves in and our call to be each of the characters. Yes, we are called to grill the burgers and brew the coffee, and we are called to be truly present to those present in our midst, and we are called to be Christ, to welcome and love each one just as he or she is.

Re-arranging the words of the collect, let us pray:

“Strengthen our hands to serve you in others, open our hearts to hear you, and give us the will to love you, for God’s sake.”

Amen.