

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible and lighted candle at the center of your group.

**LEADER:** Who among us does justice? Thinks truth in their hearts, speaks kindly of others, makes no trouble for neighbors, deals honestly with all?

**ALL: All who do justice will live in God's presence.**

**LEADER:** Who among us does hospitality? Welcomes newcomers and all comers, sets meals before the hungry, visits those who don't get out, takes time to listen?

**ALL: All who show hospitality will live in God's presence.**

Mary and Martha appear in two gospels, Luke and John. The five-verse story in Luke forms Sunday's gospel. It sets the two sisters at odds and requires Jesus to mediate. In John both women are visible, central characters who advance the action in chapters 11 and 12. With Lazarus, their brother, they are friends Jesus loves.

What keeps Martha so busy that Jesus stops her in Sunday's gospel? Why does Mary listen so intently at Jesus' feet? What makes Martha's house so well known? How do you imagine the lives and ministries of these two disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection?

When communities of faith today celebrate their centennials

and create books to record their history, these books usually feature their pastors. If the parish has a school, the history may single out its principals by name and photo as it does the pastors. We tend to honor our leaders even though no one person makes a community visible.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reported the top ten U.S. dioceses with more parishes than active priests—among them my home diocese—St. Cloud (2016). At the time, 56 priests served 131 parishes.

This tends to make small, rural parishes more dependent than ever on the less visible leaders who animate their continuing practice of Christian

life—putting on funeral lunches, organizing religion classes, cleaning the church, mowing the cemetery. Many of these invisible leaders are women.

In 1987, the sisters at our house started a small Christian community. We called it Second Sunday, the day each month we gather. We invited sisters from two other houses to join us. The circle has widened ever since and welcomes all comers today, 32 years later. How do we keep going? We take turns hosting and leading gospel reflection.

● **Name and tell about women and men who sustain the life of your faith community.**



# GOSPEL

## Martha welcomes Jesus to her home.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him to her home. She had a sister named Mary, who seated herself at the Lord's feet and listened to his teachings. Martha, who was busy with all the details of hospitality, came to Jesus and said:

**MARTHA:** Lord, is it of no concern to you that my sister has left me all alone to serve? Tell her to help me.

**JESUS:** Martha, Martha, you are anxious and upset about many things; one thing only is necessary. Mary has chosen the better portion, and she shall not be deprived of it.

Luke 10.38-42



and Mary represent two forms of ministries evolving in the Christian community at the time Luke wrote—preaching the good news and gathering the community to break bread.

Many women today value Sunday's gospel because it is one of the few stories about women. However, sermons tend to erase the importance of Mary and Martha as named individuals and reduce them to types. Martha represents the active life, Mary the contemplative. Martha stands for doing, Mary for being. Martha represents works; Mary, faith.

- What roles do you imagine Martha and Mary play in this post-resurrection community?
- Describe sermons you have heard preached on this gospel. What have you valued in them?
- What has inspired or frustrated you in this gospel?

## Why does the gospel remember Martha and Mary by name?

**M**artha and Mary are among the few early followers of Jesus whose names we know. That Christian tradition remembers Martha and Mary by name suggests their importance in the early Christian community. Tradition remembers many disciples only as anonymous members of groups and many others only by their affliction; for example, the woman bent over or the man with the withered hand.

In his gospel Luke names just 10 women and mentions 10 unnamed women as well as two groups of women—the women disciples from Galilee (8.2-3; 24.49,55-56; 24.1-10) and the women of Jerusalem (22.27).

Luke includes many more men in his narrative—39 named men disciples, 40 unnamed men, and 27 groups of men, one the 5,000 men at the multiplication of the loaves. His gospel reflects the

point of view of the community's male leaders.

To be remembered by name makes people stand out. Perhaps tradition remembers Martha and Mary because their home was not only a place Jesus stayed during his lifetime but a house church, where after Jesus' resurrection, Martha welcomed a community of disciples to remember his teaching and break bread as he asked. John's gospel also remembers Martha for gathering Jesus, her brother, sister, and friends for a meal (John 12.1-2).

In Sunday's gospel Mary seats herself at Jesus' feet to listen to his teachings and Martha serves him. These two actions—listening to Jesus' words and serving a meal—are the same actions that take place in the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist at every parish Mass. Perhaps Martha

**L**uke sets Martha and Mary strangely against each other in Sunday's short gospel scene. Rather than ask Mary directly to help, Martha asks Jesus to command Mary to help with the work of hospitality. Her request backfires. Instead Jesus

chides her, “Martha, Martha,” for being too busy. He praises Mary for choosing the one thing necessary—hearing his word. In a positive interpretation, Jesus frees Martha from overburdening herself with service and hospitality—good news for contemporary supermoms.

However, a dangerous memory lurks in the silencing of Martha and the silent attention of Mary at Jesus’ feet. Although Jesus defends Mary’s right to be his disciple and learn at his feet as students do, she does not enter into dialog with her teacher. She never questions. She never speaks or preaches in this gospel. She models a passive, silent listening reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 14.34, which forbids women to speak in church.

The gospel characterizes Martha as distracted. The word suggests a woman too fussy about her house or too elaborate in her meals—a woman who hasn’t got her priorities straight.

What if we characterize Martha instead as interested and committed to many things and picture her trying to provide for those who gather at her house church, wanting to listen to Jesus teach, readying a meal that will include gathering the community and breaking bread.

● **What if Martha is a pastor in this story, not a busy housewife?**

**F**eminist bible scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests reading the conflict between Mary and Martha in the context of the conflict in Acts of the Apostles 6.1-6. In Acts, Greek-speaking

widows complain they are not getting their fair amount of food.

The twelve call the whole Christian community in Jerusalem together and say, “It is not right that we neglect the word of God in order to wait tables.” They value the ministry of preaching over the ministry of serving the table. They then appoint seven men to serve the food daily to the community, creating the ministry of deacons. The word *deacon* means *to serve*. Interestingly, two of the first deacons—Stephen and Philip—quickly become preachers.

Luke’s gospel places Jesus’ visit to Martha and Mary during his historical ministry, A.D. 30. However, Martha addresses Jesus in the story not by name but by the post-resurrection title *Lord*. This detail reminds us that the community that first heard Luke’s narrative lived at least 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The conflicts in the Martha and Mary story and in Acts suggest that official ministries are evolving in this community of the A.D. 80s. Seemingly, by the time Luke writes, the position of women in the Christian communities has become controversial.

Although Sunday’s gospel shows Martha offering table hospitality as Christians do at Eucharist and Mary listening to the Word, this scene effectively silences the ministries of both women. Jesus tells Martha to give up the ministry of her household, and perhaps her house church, and join her sister in preferring the better part—silent listening to Jesus.

**Should the Church ordain women as deacons as it did during its first eleven centuries? Pope Francis established a commission to study the question in 2016 that confirmed the past practice. Pope Francis appointed a second commission, currently studying the question. Many worry about opposition to such a change. What about you? Would you welcome permanent women deacons in the Church? In your parish? Search out Dr. Phyllis Vagano online or on YouTube to learn more. She was an American member of the first commission.**



Perhaps their ministries of word and table made Martha and Mary too memorable in the life of the early Christian community to forget. Perhaps they were so important that Luke uses the voice of Jesus’ authority to put them in their place, the same subordinate position women are transforming today.

- **How do you participate in the Church’s ministries of word and table?**
- **Whom do you teach about Jesus?**
- **How do you help hold the community of faith together?**
- **What would happen if all the women in your parish withheld their service and leadership?**

## Abraham & Sarah's hospitality.

**W**hen a mysterious threesome appear at the tent of Abraham and Sarah, the couple shows this trinity such warm and lavish hospitality that the messengers disclose they are from God. They return the hospitality with the promise that the child Abraham and Sarah have awaited for 25 years will be born next year.

The 15th-century Russian artist Andrei Rublev reflects as a Christian in the famous icon he wrote of this scene. He sees the three guests as the Trinity. He represents them as angels with golden wings and seats them around a table with a cup of wine at the center. Two gaze at each other's faces; the third looks toward the chalice, representing the Eucharist. Their circle is open toward the viewer, inviting us into the life they share. This unity of beings, this divine presence, Rublev shows, is a warm community of friends, a community in the midst of diversity.

### A Trinity of Visitors

**NARRATOR:** God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and bowed to the ground.

**ABRAHAM:** Sir, if I find favor with you, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought that

you may wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree. Now that you have come this close to your servant, let me bring you food, that you may refresh yourselves before you go on your way.

**THREE:** Do as you have said.

**NARRATOR:** Abraham hastened into the tent and spoke to Sarah.

**ABRAHAM:** Quick, three measures of fine flour! Knead it and make rolls.

**NARRATOR:** He ran to the herd, picked out a tender, choice steer, and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it. Then he got some curds and milk, as well as the steer that had been prepared, and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree while they ate.

**THREE:** Where is your wife, Sarah?

**ABRAHAM:** In the tent.

**NARRATOR:** Then one of the three spoke.

**ONE:** I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son.

Genesis 18.1-10

- What do you see in the icon?
- How does hospitality reveal God's presence?
- What traditions of hospitality do you show visitors to your home?



## PRAY

**LEADER:** Who among us does hospitality? Let us repeat the names of people who like Martha and Mary model hospitality for us, people in a parish, families, or work to whom we should say thank you. (*Pause*)

**ALL:** All who show hospitality will live in God's presence.

**LEADER:** May the risen Jesus find our doors open in welcome to all.

**ALL:** Let us go forth in peace to love and witness in the Spirit, to live the Christian story in our time.



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