

*You are worried and distracted over many things – there is need of only one thing.*

One of the little changes I made when I first came to St. John's last fall was to introduce a new feature on the outside bulletin board: Cartoon of the Week. Taste in humor is so subjective, and I know I've taken some chances with humor that might offend someone's sensibilities. Not too many people mention it, but there are a few who tell me about their response to the week's cartoon. Often they are religious, and sometimes seasonal or topical. Last Sunday, for a Baptism, our parish secretary Betty found a cartoon of a Baptismal font with a baby whose older brother was waiting at the base of the Baptismal font with swim fins. Some are classic Peanuts cartoons, others right from last week's New Yorker.

I've been doing this for years, and I have a library of hundreds of cartoons. Why? I guess I find that humor is a healthy way to cope with life's uncertainties. Some people have a stoic view of life, or a heroic view, or a romantic stance to life. But for me, what works best is irony. Not bitter humor or sarcastic mockery, but more of a sense that despite our best efforts, we fall short, early and often.

When I find humor in the Bible, I always want to stop and highlight the humor. We know how humor is difficult to translate between cultures, but sometimes we can. Our first reading not only shows hospitality, but good-natured humor. Abram and Sarah welcome three men, who are sometimes only one man, the Lord. Sarah is eavesdropping at the tent flap, and when this barren old woman hears that next year she's going to have a son, she can't help laughing at God's plan.

You have to be pretty much at peace with God to laugh that way, and Sarah isn't quite there. And yet God is portrayed as enjoying her laughter. She laughs to herself, "After I have grown old, ... shall I have pleasure?" Then the Lord asks (rhetorically) "Why did Sarah laugh?" It will happen as I said. Our reading omits the very last verse [15]: "*But Sarah denied it, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. [The Lord] said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'*" The Lord enjoys "needling" Sarah, as if to say: "So - you're laughing at the gifts of God, are you? She says, *no, I'm not laughing, not really. 'Oh yes, you are!'*"

The early church saw, in this story, a prefiguring of the Christian Trinity. You might recall a favorite image I used to help along my Trinity Sunday sermon. The German mystic Meister Eckhart linked the Trinity and laughter – God the Father laughs, and begets the Son. The Son laughs back at the Father, and begets the Holy Spirit. The whole Trinity laughs, and gives birth to us.

Many of us attended the memorial service for Victor Matusek a few weeks ago. I mention this service as to show how Christian people can deal with death; a mix of tears at the departure

of a loved one, and a joyful celebration of that life. The family and some friends told stories, some of which had us laughing out loud. How can we do this? As the Commendation in the Prayer Book puts this irony: All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia! I was actually standing by the bedside of Victor shortly after his death, and when his widow Lois walked into the room, she approached his body with a warm smile, and said how happy she was that her husband could die without any further suffering. When our time comes for bereavement, mixed in with our tears, will there be that kind of deep abiding joy? And what makes this joy possible? Nothing less than Christ's triumph over death!

Last Sunday we celebrated a Baptism, the passage of a new Christian soul through a symbolic death by water before being raised up as Christ's own forever. This is why Dante could call his great literary achievement a divine "Comedy" – not that he wrote a lots of jokes, but that at the end of it all, we share in God's life!

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Today's Gospel passage shows us two ways of serving God in another person. Even though Mary and Martha acts differently, their ways are really complimentary. Martha's way embraces the super coffee hour host or hostess – think of a brunch, which we will enjoy next, *after* our spiritual nourishment of word and sacrament. Of course we need both spiritual and physical food, but we don't want Martha showing up in worship and telling us to hurry it up, because the food's getting cold! Mary has been taken as the image of the contemplative life. Is it really better? Jesus says so – "Mary has chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken from her." But I propose to you that it's really a matter of the right time for contemplation.

Remember last Sunday's Gospel, with the Good Samaritan as the only authentic helper while the priest and the Levite made straight for the Temple on Mount Zion? The two others wanted to spend their quiet time and worship time in the Temple, while the Samaritan (who worshipped elsewhere) saw the immediate human need.

Another way to look at the duality of Mary and Martha would be to locate this story on the path Jesus is taking towards Jerusalem, where he knows a cross awaits him. At other times we read that Jesus gratefully ate at the tables of those who welcomed him. But now that he's heading towards his final hours, he needs something else, a sympathetic listener, someone who is trying to understand his troubled heart.

Where does this leave you and me? When should you be Martha, and when Mary? When should you work hard to get the food out, and when should you let the dishes sit and give your full attention to the person you want to serve? By looking deeply at which kind of hunger your guest really has, and by putting aside your own preferences. You may be good at cooking, but not every problem is solved over food.

One final factor in this balancing act is to take a good look around at our culture. Are we living in a culture that leans to extroversion or introversion? Do Americans think too much (indecisive), or do we jump in without thinking first? I know how I answer this question – that’s why I stress the inner life, the importance of Mary’s quiet over against Martha’s over-functioning. The more our country – the world’s only superpower – values the inner life, the less we’ll support those who want people simply to act first and ask questions later.

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