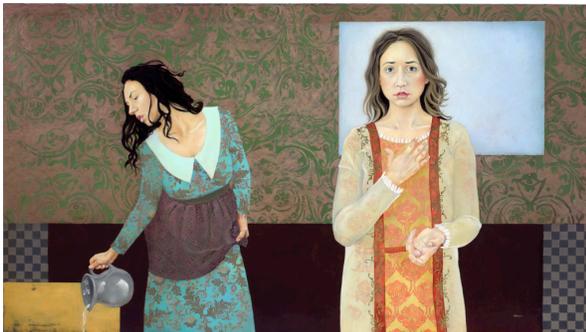


Sunday: Ordinary 16, Cycle C, 7.17.16
 Scripture: Gen 18:1-10/Col 1:24-28/Lk 10:38-42

WOMEN'S WORK: THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

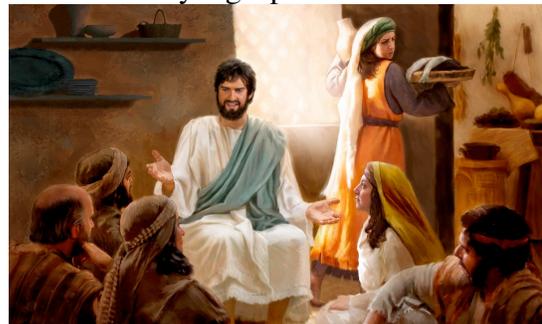
I want to spend some time today reflecting with you on the role of women in today's gospel and in the gospels in general, and to consider some of the implications for the life and ministry of women in the Church today. Over the centuries, in various interpretations of today's gospel, Martha and Mary have been pitted against one another, as representing two different forms of Church ministry – active service of others (Martha's gift) versus quiet contemplative prayer (Mary's gift). In fact, both women are part of Jesus' radical departure from the religious and cultural restrictions of his day. In this extraordinary scene, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. It would have been unusual for a woman to own house or property in that patriarchal society, and here is Jesus interacting alone in that house with women who are not members of his family. This is strictly taboo, yet Jesus makes no apology for his disregard for these social mores.



Mary, too, is part of Jesus' subversive plan, as she sits at his feet in the posture of a disciple, listening to His Word. The phrase "sat at his feet" implies what the male disciples did: received instruction in order to proclaim the Good News. There was a rabbinical saying that went: "*Better to burn the Torah, than teach it to women.*"

What role could women possibly play in the religious world of Jesus' day in the face of such a demeaning attitude? So, while the dramatic implications of this scene eluded scripture interpreters for centuries, and while we, in our culture and time, find nothing unusual about it, in fact, a bold and daring statement is made here.

For a woman to be occupying the position of a full disciple – sitting at the Masters' feet-- was a radical challenge to the society in which Jesus lived. Mary was claiming equality with men. And Jesus not only allowed it; he even said to Martha that "*Mary had chosen the better part.*" And, he added "*it will not be taken from her.*" In Paul's epistles we are given the names and see glimpses of women who were in leadership positions in the early Church: Priscilla, Aquila, Junia, Euodia and Syntyche. But Jesus' and the early Church's radical view of women's equality with men did not survive very long. In fact, not much time passed before "this better part" was taken from those women who followed Mary as disciples of Christ. The forces against it were just too strong. Today, as the attitudes toward women that subverted the teaching of Jesus are changing in many places, we in the Church are being challenged to once again accept the fact that Jesus still has something to teach us that seems subversive to the so-called normal ordering of society and the Church. The first "radical feminist" in the history of our Church was Jesus himself as he makes that evident in today's gospel.

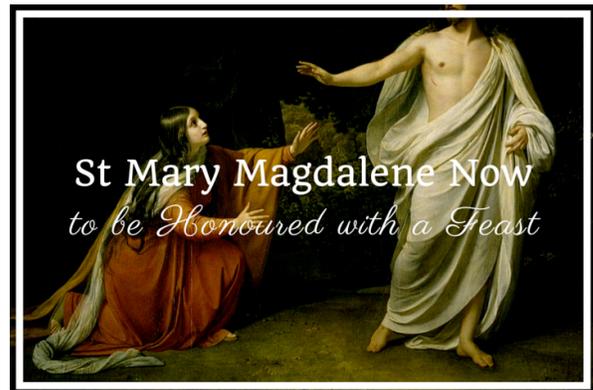


Jesus came to set all people free for the service of God: men and women, adults and children, Jew and Samaritan, rich and poor, master and servant. Both vocations – all vocations -- are critical for the life of the Church. We need those who work in the world to spread the Gospel and Christian values, and who struggle for fairness and for peace. We also need those who support them in prayer. They aren't rivals, but allies, partners in the work of the Gospel. Women, as well as men, are called to that task. There is also, within each of us, the need to work AND to pray in order to follow the Gospel fully. When the world pulls us in a thousand directions, our prayer draws us back to Christ to listen to Him. Time with the Lord is our rudder in any storm; and, like a rudder, prayer helps us use the winds that come at us from whatever direction, to bring us closer to Christ, closer to home.

Two recent happenings in the Church initiated by Pope Francis are encouraging signs of hope for women and for all of us. In May during an audience with members of the International Union of Superiors General of Women Religious (the nuns who are the heads of their orders), Pope Francis announced the creation of a commission to examine the history of female deacons in the early Church. We know from history that there were female deacons. In the Bible we are given the name of at least one of them, Phoebe. The questions would be: *What did those early deaconesses do and what was the nature of their commissioning? Was it similar to the rite of the ordination of male deacons? If this ministry were re-established in the Church today, what would it look like? How would it be carried out? How would it further the spread of the Gospel?* Many serious studies have already been done and my prayer is that the Holy Father would put some of those women on his commission

who have already studied and written about this topic.

The second encouraging decision at the Vatican took place in early June at the prompting of Pope Francis. He has promoted the annual liturgical remembrance of Saint Mary Magdalene -- her saint's day is on July 22 -- to the rank of a feast. That means she will enjoy the same liturgical status as the apostles. The only higher rank of a holy day is a "solemnity," which is something reserved for a few days honoring Jesus, his Blessed Mother, Saint Joseph, Saint John the Baptist, Saints Peter and Paul, and All Saints. No other woman saint besides the Virgin Mary has ever been accorded the high honor of 'feast.' Liturgically speaking, the decision puts Mary Magdalene on par with the celebrations of the male apostles.



Mary Magdalene was a DISCIPLE and, in many ways, the founding mother of the Church. The women of the gospels were PARTNERS with Jesus from the beginning and can serve as models of the continuing partnership that should exist and grow in the Church today. They were EVANGELISTS, as the Acts of the Apostles tells us: "*all devoted themselves to prayer together with some women and Mary, mother of Jesus and his brothers...*" These "women" were the faithful followers of Jesus throughout his ministry and became heralds of his Risen life.

We may delude ourselves into thinking that there is equality between men and women today, but I think if we were to stop for even ten minutes, break into small groups and listen to many of the women here in church -- listening attentively and openly, as Mary listened to Jesus in today's gospel -- we would hear stories of subtle discrimination and blatant prejudice in corporate settings, educational systems, government offices, health care institutions and certainly in the Church. Here, most of all, we allow the women to prepare the food in the kitchen, to slice the tomatoes and onions for this weekend's parish picnic, to prepare and serve food in soup kitchens and at parish potlucks in the hall, but not to formally bless our food at this table of the Eucharist.

I once saw a bumper sticker on a car in front of me at a stoplight. It read: *Women belong in the kitchen... on the Senate floor... in the Oval Office...* Today, I'd add: *and in the Church: at its altar and in its chancery office, on international papal committees, on our staffs as well as in our pews.* Because, from the beginning, women have been the faithful followers of Our Lord -- his courageous companions as witness, disciple, partner and evangelist, proclaiming the Good News, whether quietly at his feet or noisily in the kitchen. The household of the Church would have collapsed long ago without the prayer and action of women -- you women -- who bring the gospel to life. Thank you for who you are and what you do: for your prayer and your work.

Father John Kasper, OSFS