

## **16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Cycle C, 7.21.19

Genesis 18:1-10/Colossians 1:24-28/

Luke 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 to consider some of the implications for the life and ministry of women in the Church and society 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.*" 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. The first "radical feminist" in the history of our Church was Jesus himself as he makes that evident in today's gospel.

Two recent happenings in society and in the Church brought the role and status of women front and center for me once again. Millions watched the U.S. Women's National Team defeat the Netherlands team to capture the nation's fourth Women's World Cup Soccer title two weeks ago. The players were welcomed

home as national heroes to chants of “Equal Pay” in NYC’S “Canyon of Heroes” ticker-tape parade.



Megan Rapinoe and her teammates were not just heroes for what they did on the field in France, but also for how they are leading the fight for equality nationwide. The argument from the sponsoring agency is that they offer “equitable pay” for women, not necessarily “equal pay.” Their argument against equal pay is that even though the women players practice as much, if not more than their male counterparts and may win more games, “the men’s teams pull the World Cup money wagon,” as one commentator put it. The women’s victory this summer may turn the tide on that argument, but it will be an uphill battle.

The second arena of battle for women is the Church. I read a piece this week entitled “A Woman’s Place is not in the Vatican.” The article criticized Pope Francis for talking a good game about advancing women to leadership and decision-making roles in the Church, but falling short on follow-through. There are some positive signs. Five years ago Pope Francis appointed a Brazilian nun, Sister Luiza Premioli, as a full member of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples – a historical first, since such a Vatican position had never been occupied by a woman. Then, a few weeks ago, he

named seven women among 23 persons appointed to another major office in the Vatican. However, in the communications departments of the Vatican, out of eleven posts, men occupy ten of them – only one woman, a lay theologian from Slovenia. Another 17-member communications board of directors has only two women. Among the 31 staff members of the Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, only three are women.



Some wonder how serious the Pope really is in advancing the role of women in the Church. I guess all we can do is give him credit for trying, pray that God give him a few more years of good health and strength, and remind ourselves that “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” [The building of Rome may have gone faster if women were the architects, contractors, supervisors and workers.]



As people of faith we can hold fast to the vocation of Mary Magdalene, She 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.

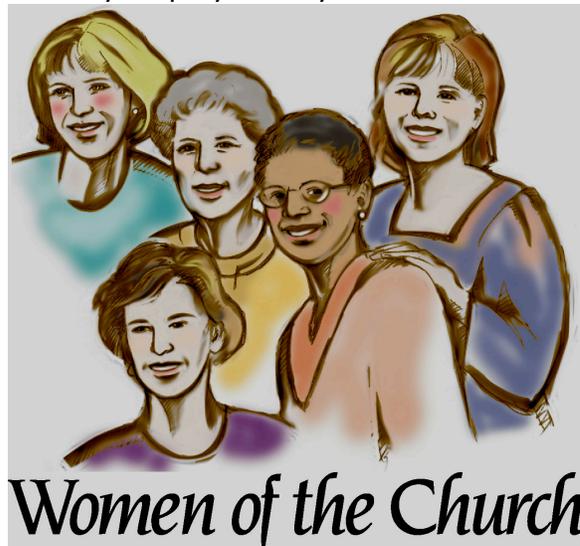


We may delude ourselves into believing that there is equality between men and women today, but I think if we were to stop for even ten minutes, break into small groups and listen to many of the women here in church -- listening attentively and openly, as Mary listened to Jesus in today’s gospel -- we would hear stories of subtle discrimination and blatant prejudice in corporate settings, educational systems, government offices, health care institutions and certainly in the Church. Let’s not overlook the great progress that has been made for women’s equality. One notable advancement is that all-male boards among the 500 largest U.S. companies have become a nearly extinct species. In 2009, there were 56 firms in that ‘Board of Directors’ group that didn’t include any

women. As of June, there was one. Yet, we still have a long way to go.

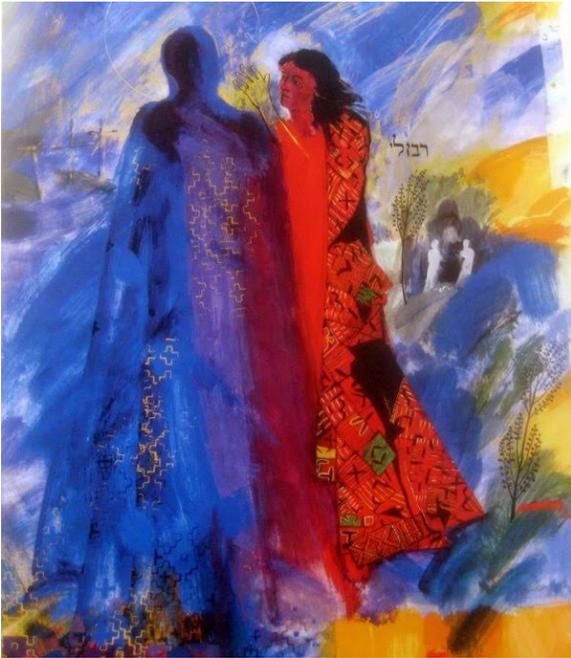
Here in the Church, most of all, change is needed. We allow the women to prepare the food in the kitchen, to slice the tomatoes and onions for a parish potluck, to prepare and serve food in soup kitchens, but not to formally bless our food at this table of the Eucharist. I once saw a bumper sticker on 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 offices, 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.



I invite you on Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, to our commemoration of St. Mary Magdalene here in our new Community Center at 7:00

p.m. The event is entitled -*“Celebrate the Women Who Raised You Up.”* Along with prayer and ritual to commemorate the saint’s Feast, we’ll share with one another stories and remembrances of women who have been significant in our lives-- those who have left this world and those who are among us. Details are in the bulletin and foyer. Come even if you haven’t pre-registered, and even if you’re not a woman. As men, we owe our lives to women who gave us birth and raised us up. Until we men get on the bandwagon, the orchestra will be incomplete and the music won’t be as harmonious and beautiful as it could be.



*John Kasper, OSFS*