

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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One of the most enjoyable books I've read in the past several years is one titled, Gilded: How Newport Became America's Richest Resort, written by Deborah Davis. It is a slightly tongue-in-cheek history about how the super-rich families of late 19th century East Coast America dispatched to Newport, Rhode Island every summer to cool off at what they called their summer cottages, but which were in fact some of the most decadently over-the-top mansions that were ever built in this country. The names were ones like Astor, Vanderbilt, Bouvier, Carnegie and Morgan, and during their summer vacations on the seashore they were supposedly there to extend hospitality to their fellow super-rich friends with regular teas and brunches and garden parties and formal dinners. In fact, what most of them were there to do was to see who could impress everybody else more than their neighbor. I said it's a "slightly tongue-in-cheek" description because you really can't make some of this stuff up. Here's a little taste of what was going on in 1881:

"It would take at least three seasons for even the wealthiest outsiders to break into Mrs. Astor's Newport, and only if the supplicant were very, very lively...some aspirants could expect to devote as many as seven summers to the quest..."

The infamous 'dog's dinner' was another headline-grabbing spectacle. It was a birthday party for Elizabeth Lehr's Pomeranian. Seven dogs and their mistresses received engraved invitations to the unusual event. The birthday 'boy' presided at a table decorated with red dahlias, and his canine 'friends' were served stewed liver and rice, fricassee of bones, and shredded dog biscuits. There was also a birthday cake with three candles. One happy dachshund ate so much that he passed out and had to be carried home. The other dogs enjoyed a lively after-dinner game of hide-and-seek with several cats that were let loose for the occasion."

I think we're a fairly long way here from the dinner party hosted for Jesus by Martha and Mary back in Israel that day, but I also think the story of Newport high society can illustrate, in a fairly vivid way, the difference between hospitality that is rooted in genuine *service*, and hospitality that is rooted in self-promotion or even just grotesque ignorance.

Yes, it's true, even something as apparently generous as the welcoming of guests can become infected by the effects of sin and selfishness if we allow that to happen. And our gospel today can serve to awaken us to the fact that there really is no human activity—however virtuous it may look—that counts for very much as an act of discipleship unless it is motivated by the desire to serve the man and the mission of Jesus.

At first glance it seems that Jesus is being a bit harsh on Martha in today's gospel reading. How, after all, could one find fault with the business of making a holy guest feel welcome in one's home? Why would the Lord have any reason to criticize Martha, who was only trying to help? It seems that the answer is in *why* she was trying to help. Some do it because they really care about the mission. Others do it in order to feel good about themselves. Martha, we are told, felt the burden and anxiety of being a good enough hostess, even though there's no hint that Jesus was being neglected or feeling slighted. Martha was all wrapped up in the emotions of Martha. And there's the problem. Even the most worthy and good activities of our lives can become the occasion for sin if they start to be all about us and our excellence, our perfection, our reputation. because the purpose of everything we strive to do in the Lord's name is to make clear the presence of the **Lord** in our midst, rather than to make clear the presence of *us*. It's no accident that these mid-summer gospels from the Book of Luke are addressed primarily to *us*—who already consider ourselves to be relatively adequate followers of Jesus.

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They invite us to examine our motives and to purify our intentions.

- When we visit the sick or homebound, *whom* do we imagine is really there?
- When we welcome guests and strangers into our parish, *whom* do we imagine is really doing that?
- When we extend generosity of time, talent or treasure, *who* exactly are we expecting to be congratulated or recognizes for that?
- When we instruct children or adults in the richness of our faith, *whose* wisdom do we imagine to be involved?
- When we present our talents here at the liturgy, *who* exactly is admired?

This is what the Martha, Martha gospel can nag us about. Even in our greatest offerings of service, it's not about us. It's about pointing to that Lord who is the reason for all we do. We come to Eucharist each week to try to remember that. It is good to be here again, in order to hear it again.