

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C  
Fr. Chad S. Green  
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church  
Sammamish, Washington  
24 July 2022

Genesis 18:20-32  
Psalm 138  
Colossians 2:12-14  
(Romans 8:15bc) Luke 11:1-13

*Persist in Choosing the Better Part*

In last week's Gospel, we had the opportunity to reflect on two things: One, the importance of being anchored in our relationship with Jesus Christ, because of the many distractions of the world that are continuously trying to pull us out of that relationship. Two, that it's not just *things*, but also *people*, that can try to pull us out of our relationship with Jesus, whether that's through our fear of being rejected by them for being a disciple, or even through attacks from fellow disciples.

Martha was in the room with Jesus—yet she really wasn't there. She was doing something objectively good, but she also made an assumption that what she was doing was in alignment with God's will for her in that moment. She was feeling burdened, anxious, and worried—all signs that the enemy spirit was lurking somewhere, trying to distort her gifts of service and hospitality, and drive her into the sins of envy and anger.

Which points us to the second lesson. Martha's harsh words about her sister Mary are an example of how—not just things and activities—bur even other people can be an obstacle in our relationship with Jesus. Mary could have easily—and understandably—retaliated with harsh words for Martha. Yet, she chose the better part—staying within the peace of Jesus—and it would not be taken from her.<sup>1</sup> How can we learn to do the same?

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Today's First Reading continues to teach us how we as disciples of Jesus are called to use our words to help—rather than hinder—one another in our relationship with God. The Reading,

from Genesis, picks up from last week's First Reading. As Abraham is seeing his visitors off, he learns that they have been sent by the LORD to deal with the sinfulness of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. We can learn a lot from Abraham's reaction to this news.

Is he happy to hear of what is coming to them? Does he feel satisfied or vindicated that wicked and sinful people are going to be destroyed? No! He pleads for the LORD's mercy. Repeatedly. That is an example of how we are meant to use our words. Our words are meant for good: for praying for one another; for encouraging one another; for building up one another and the Kingdom of God—not for destroying.

Not for complaining about others or pointing out their faults. Not for taking satisfaction or delight in any bad that comes to them. Not for gossip and slander. Pope Francis has spoken often about the evil of gossip, and has made several powerful analogies about the reality of the destruction gossip causes in our Church. At an audience a few years ago, teaching on the Holy Spirit, he said the following about how we choose to use our words:

In the liturgy, “we offer each other peace...[and] exchange it among ourselves. ... But then what happens? We go out and begin to speak ill of others, to ‘excoriate’ others. Gossip begins. And gossip is war. This will not do! If we have received the sign of peace with the power of the Holy Spirit, we must be men and women of peace, and not destroy, with the tongue, the peace that the Holy Spirit has created. ... Think carefully: gossip is not the work of the Holy Spirit... Gossip destroys what God has made. Please: let us stop gossiping!”

“May the Holy Spirit grant to all of us the...courage to communicate the Gospel, in deed and word, to those we meet on our way. With deeds and words, but good words: those which build up. Not the words of gossip, which destroy. Please, when you leave the church, consider that the peace received is to be given to others: not for destroying with gossip. Do not forget this.”<sup>2</sup>

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I would also like to clarify what gossip is and what it is not. If someone is in trouble, in danger, or being harmed. If something illegal or immoral is happening. Then it's not gossip to

talk to an appropriate person who can legitimately help resolve the situation or provide protection.

What Pope Francis is talking about—what Jesus corrected in Martha—how Mary chose to respond to Martha—and what Abraham showed us with his example of intercessory prayer—is that we are called to use our words for good. For calling down God’s mercy and a blessing upon people—particularly those who we might consider an enemy or someone we disagree with.

To clarify further what gossip is, we can refer to the Catechism of the Catholic Church in the section on the Eighth Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”<sup>3</sup> There are two aspects of gossip that we’re likely familiar with, as well as a third that we might not be as aware of.<sup>4</sup>

One aspect is called *detraction*: that is, talking about another’s faults and failings to another person without a valid reason. Again, it is a valid reason—and thus, not gossip—to speak to an appropriate person about getting help to protect someone from harm.

A second aspect is called *calumny*: that is, harming the reputation of another by lying, distorting the truth, or only telling part of the truth, thus causing others to form a bad judgment about them.

We might not be as familiar with the third aspect of gossip because it involves—not our tongue—but our ears. The third aspect is called *rash judgment*: that is, assuming a fault we hear about another is true without much evidence, and thus forming a bad judgment about them.

So, you see, we participate in the sin of gossip not only by speaking, but also by listening—or reading—words of gossip from another. It’s important to be careful what we say. And it’s also important to be careful about the conversations we get into, and what we listen to and read in the media. It’s important to develop the courage to stop or avoid sinful

conversations, because it can poison our minds and hearts, and then cause us to become the source of evil words.

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I'll conclude today's homily by pointing us to Jesus' words in today's Gospel. His disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray.<sup>5</sup> He responded with words that are very familiar to us. Perhaps, along with the *Hail Mary*, a prayer we've prayed more than any other prayer in our lives.

But, just after He gave us those holy words to pray, He taught us a most important approach to prayer. That is: *persistence*. Jesus encourages us to be *persistent* in prayer.<sup>6</sup> To keep on asking. Because, as soon as we stop asking—we will no longer receive. To keep on seeking. Because, as soon as we stop seeking—we will no longer find. To keep on knocking. Because, as soon as we stop knocking—the door will no longer be opened to us.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, there are challenges to prayer. Sometimes it seems quite easy, and sometimes it seems impossible. Sometimes we don't know where to start; don't know how to do it; or don't know how to grow in it. Sometimes it's our own distractedness that's an obstacle. Sometimes it's the attacks of the devil or even fellow humans that try to knock us out of a life of prayer, discipleship, and relationship with Jesus. Sometimes it seems like our prayers are not being answered—or we can't see how they're being answered.

All these can contribute to the temptation to give up. We must do our best to resist that temptation. To keep on asking, seeking, and knocking. To keep on choosing the better part. And to encourage one another to do the same.

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As many of you know, I walked the Portuguese Route of the Camino earlier this month—from Porto to Santiago de Compostela. I'm still praying about and processing what I experienced on that pilgrimage, and will share the lessons of it as the Holy Spirit prompts me to do so.

One of the lessons was about persistence. The Camino certainly requires persistence. 30,000 to 40,000 steps a day can only be accomplished one step at a time. You have to persist one step at a time each day, to reach the next town. And you have to wake up again the next day and persist in doing it all again to eventually reach the Cathedral in Santiago and the relics of Saint James.

But, as you persist in the Camino, you begin to develop a capacity—or, I'd even say—a taste or savor for the walking. Not only does your body get used to it. But your whole being gets used to it. It still takes effort and work, but the desire to put in the effort and work grows. The enjoyment of the experience grows.

That's what I experienced on the Camino. It was an extreme version of persistence, but on about the third day, I began to look forward to the walking. Not just to the walking, but to the hours of contemplation that the walking afforded me. I was happy to reach Santiago—but I think I was also feeling that I was going to miss the walking. It was hard to imagine that the next day I wasn't going to wake up and keep on walking.

Persistence had created within my being not only a capacity for the walking, but even a desire for it. And there was no other way to create that capacity or that desire other than to walk 30,000 to 40,000 steps a day for several days. It could not have been manufactured by walking for an hour. Or walking for only one day. I had to go through the experience.

That's what prayer is like. At first, the capacity might not be there. The desire might not be there. But, the more we persist, the more the capacity and the desire are formed. And, when we stop the habit of prayer or lose consistency and persistence, then we can also lose the capacity, desire, and taste for prayer. That's why prayer can sometimes be hard to talk about or explain to others—because it can only be explained to an extent. It really has to be experienced, and we don't always have the patience for that—in addition to the obstacles we face.

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Jesus' words last week were not merely a correction of Martha or any of us who struggle with distractions. Jesus' words to us today are not merely a pep talk to keep trying. They are so much more than that. They are a powerful promise to each one of us: There is need of only one thing.

If you choose the better part. If you learn from your mistakes. If you listen to Jesus and allow Him to teach you.<sup>8</sup> If you repent of and turn away from those times when you've chosen the lesser part. If you work at ignoring distractions. If you ask for help in prayer, from fellow disciples and from the saints and angels. If you encourage one another in prayer and refuse to tear others down or react to those who attempt to tear you down.

If you persist in prayer and in choosing and re-choosing the better part. Jesus promises you that He will *not* be taken away from you.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:42

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180606\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180606_udienza-generale.html)

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 2464-2513

<sup>4</sup> CCC 2477

<sup>5</sup> Luke 11:1

<sup>6</sup> Luke 11:8

<sup>7</sup> Luke 11:9-10

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:39

<sup>9</sup> Luke 10:42