

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time  
July 18, 2010  
Fr. Tom Elliott

## Finding Foodstuff

Genesis 18:1-10a  
Psalm 15  
Colossians 1:24-28  
Luke 10:38-42

Frying pans are only as great as what we put into them! Early one morning, after I had finished drinking my coffee, I decided to make myself a big breakfast. I *love* breakfast and I was very hungry. I got out the biggest frying pan I could find, anticipating filling it up with fried eggs, bacon, and hash browns. As the frying pan was heating up on the stove, I headed for the refrigerator to get the food. I opened the door and there was... nothing. I was out of eggs and bacon, and hash browns; In fact, I was out of *everything* that could have possibly been put into a frying pan! It was very frustrating.

Prayer can sometimes be frustrating, too. William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, in their book, The Practice of Spiritual Direction, relate the image of a frying pan to the spiritual life. Building on their image, we can think of our prayer time each day as a frying pan that needs “foodstuff” placed in it. Sometimes, we struggle to find foodstuff for the frying pan of prayer. The ultimate “foodstuff” for prayer is our desire to spend time with God. This desire can manifest itself in our simply sitting and being with the Lord, or it might manifest itself in a conversation with God.

At times, however, we don’t know how to start that conversation. We may feel like we don’t have anything important to say to God, especially compared to all of the overwhelming things He is dealing with throughout the world. Or, we may feel like there is *so much* going on that it won’t all fit into the frying pan of prayer!

During such times of struggle, some people simply quit praying. They wait until there is something really urgent that they need to share with God—usually some type of crisis—and then they resume their habit of prayer throughout the duration of the crisis. Most of us here have experienced that approach to prayer at one time or another.

In addition to simply abandoning prayer when one cannot find material for conversation with God, some people look for distractions during prayer. They might turn to television, e-mail, or the telephone when prayer is dry. In addition to these distractions, we are sometimes tempted to use religious things as distractions. For example, devotions are awesome and they can have a wonderful place in our prayer life. I know many people who have beautiful devotions to things like the Rosary, the Divine Mercy chaplet, novenas, etc. There are also awesome devotionals, like God’s Word Among Us and the Magnificat that can be helpful to our prayer life. However, they can sometimes become a distraction to our conversation with God. When prayer is dry and difficult, when we are struggling to find “food” for the “frying pan” of prayer, we can be tempted to hide behind the rituals of devotions and devotionals rather than engaging the Living God through conversation, or even *through the devotion or devotional*.

Another common temptation for us when we don’t know what to talk to God about in prayer is to turn our prayer time into a time for spiritual reading. We might find ourselves sitting

in Eucharist Adoration, reading through the collected works of St. Theresa of Avila. Spiritual reading is extremely important, and sometimes God wants us to use it for prayer, but if our objective becomes focused on getting through chapters rather than engaging the living God, then it is no longer prayer, it's spiritual reading or study.

In last week's Gospel reading, Jesus explained to the scholar of the law that *action* was necessary in being His follower. Jesus told the man a beautiful parable of compassion and love in action and then told him to, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37b). In today's Gospel reading, Jesus gives us the other side of that coin of discipleship—*listening*. Martha was busy with hosting Jesus, which was customary, as we heard in our first reading today, when Abraham hosted the three visitors.

While such hospitality and serving is necessary and important, the author of the Gospel of Luke purposely placed the story of Martha and Mary right after the story of the Good Samaritan in order to show that *listening* to the Word is as important as *acting* on the Word. In this way, "being" and "doing," must complement one another. The more we understand this teaching and put it into practice, the more we find "foodstuff" for prayer and greater continuity in our spiritual life.

When we reverence in our lives the importance of "being" and "doing," of listening and action, there is rarely a lack of "foodstuff" for the frying pan of our prayer time. During prayer, the topic of our conversation with God can be one or more events that happened the previous day that really moved something in our hearts. By reflecting on the *actions* (the "doing") of the previous day we find wonderful conversation pieces to share with God. We find ourselves telling Him what those events meant to us, we listen to where He was present in the events and how He loved us through them, and we become even more aware of our desire to love and serve Him.

As we have a conversation with God about one or more of the events of the previous day and how our hearts were moved, we become more deeply aware of our *desire*. Saint Ignatius of Loyola even recommends that we *name* our desire, possibly writing it down in our prayer journal. Then, as we bring that desire into the new day, we find ourselves acting, reacting, speaking, and listening in a new way. Our "doing" then influences our "being" and our "being" gives birth to a new level of "doing"! In this way, we experience a beautiful continuity from one prayer time to the next. We become better "Marthas" by becoming better "Marys" and vice versa! Rarely, then, will we lack food for the frying pan of prayer!

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:**

- ✚ During your prayer time, picture yourself sitting at the feet of Jesus. Share with Him the most significant event from the previous day. Then, watch and listen to Him. What does He think about the event you shared with Him? How did He specifically love you during that event? What desire does Jesus' response stir up in you?