Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C

Old St. Patrick’s, 2022

Before rap was a widely accepted musical form

Now with its own category in the Grammy awards

The term concerned one’s reputation:

a rap sheet was a criminal record

And getting a bad rap was acquiring

A sometimes-undeserved bad name.

While you will be relieved to know

That I am not going to deliver this homily as a musical rap

I do want to consider what happens

When someone gets an undeserved bad name.

Certain animals, for example, have gotten a bad rap:

Maybe you can blame Lion King

For making hyenas seem devious, dumb, almost criminal

Though they are highly intelligent survivors.

Various dog species have been banned in parts of the U.S.

and other countries – or at least by insurance companies

Such as Doberman Pinschers

Pitt Bulls

American Bulldogs and Great Danes

Apparently because they scare folk

and are known to knock kids off bikes.

As someone who lives with a Great Dane-Bulldog mix

I contend it’s not the dog but the human trainer.

Our 105 pounder is a great watch dog

And when you come into the house

The only thing you are in danger of

Is being licked to death …

His breeds have a bad rap.

Certain jobs have gotten a bad rap –

Did you know that according to some sources

The [most hated profession is that of a dentist](https://www.thebalancecareers.com/the-most-hated-professions-526083)?

School principals are not far behind - really?

And then there are the celebrities we love to hate:

The Tiger Woods and Pete Rose of sports fame and infamy

the Ellen Degeneres-es and Will Smiths

And I won’t even go into elected officials.

There is no doubt that animal, people, even vacation spots

get a bad rap

Because of some real or perceived truth

That makes it difficult for reaffirmation, reconciliation

And reincorporation into our heads and hearts.

In that vein I would contend that Martha in today’s gospel

Has acquired a bad rap because of an irrefutable truth:

She got chastised by Jesus himself.

Not sure that even Johnny Depp could recover

From that one.

At the same time I think Martha’s bad rap

Is somewhat undeserved.

She was such a conscientious host

caring about the well-being of her sacred guest

And for exhibiting that most human of emotions: anxiety.

Ok, maybe she’s a little OCD

A touch controlling

Even a little insensitive

But she also is a bit of a model for me …

Maybe even for us

As she copes with her anxieties in the presence of God.

A favorite science author is primatologist and neurobiologist

Robert Sapolsky whose 2017 800-page tome *Behave*

was a run-away New York Times Bestseller

And whose smarts is only matched by his humor

rendering him a YouTube star

and much sought-after speaker.

I’ve read a number of his works

The most entertain of which is his [*A Primate’s memoir*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Primate%27s_Memoir)– ostensibly a recollection of early days

as a grad student doing field work in Kenya

But ultimately a reflection on our humanity

Revealed in jungles, politics, and passion.

But it is his first major works that these readings bring to mind

Aptly titled, [*Why Zebras don’t get Ulcers*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Why_Zebras_Don%27t_Get_Ulcers)

Which you can access through his free [lecture on the topic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9H9qTdserM)

Delivered a few years ago at our very own U of I.

A basic point that he makes early in the book

is that stress is not inherently bad

but that we are the only species

Which generates internal stress

And our psychological stressors contribute significantly

To our physical and mental demise.

When chased by a lion Zebras are under stress

So their bodies secrete adrenaline and 11d other hormones

And in 4 minutes they are either free or dead

Which means the stress ends.

Most human beings, however,

Are not literally chased by lions or tigers or bears

But we are chased by

Financial and relational and personal

Lions and tigers and bears

So we turn on our own stress responses

But unlike the Zebras, they don’t last for 4 minutes

Sometimes they last for 4 decades

or as long as our bodies can handle them.

Stress is not bad in the short term

But highly problematic in the long term

As anyone on blood pressure medicine can attest.

Thus, it is not just Martha who is getting a bad rap

in today’s gospel

but maybe even the very human experience of anxiety

and I don’t think the gospel or liturgical message today

Is “don’t feel stress”!

Go back to that celebrated first reading from Genesis

a revered tale of extraordinary hospitality

in which Abraham runs around

like a metaphorical chicken with its head cut off

creating a hospitable experience

for his angelic visitors.

The passage doesn’t say that he saunters towards his guests

or leisurely texted Sarah about calling for carry out

or inquired among his servants

if there was any extra beef in the food locker.

No, the text stresses that

he runs to greet his guests

hastens to Sarah to make bread

runs to the herd to pick out a steer

and has a servant quickly prepare it.

Sounds like he has everybody stressed out

But isn’t that the cost of hospitality

Or even what we might call “good anxiety”?

Now that might sound like a contradiction in terms

But psychologists actually believe there is such a thing

As “good anxiety”

[Wendy Suzuki](https://www.npr.org/2021/09/07/1034777586/good-anxiety-benefits-coping-strategies), a professor of neural science and psychology

At New York University

Argues that instead of trying to obliterate

any feelings of anxiety

with the accompanying tightness in the chest

sweaty palms

and knot in the stomach

we can actually make friends with our anxiety

and reap all the gifts it can offer.

She wisely notes that anxiety is an important information source

underscoring what we appreciate

and value in our lives.

She says, “that is where the good anxiety lives.”

So we are anxious about relationships

Because they are important to us

We are anxious about safety,

about violence in our neighborhoods and on our streets

because the well-being of our community is important to us.

It is anxiety for the unproductive or the selfish

he misguided or self-indulgent urges

that contribute to our spiritual hypertension & ill-health.

The supposed story is told of a woman

Whose greedy husband was at the end of his life.

His dying wish was that he be buried with all of his money

telling her point blank

That he loved his money more than anything.

Despite advice of family and friends,

she acceded to his instructions when he died,

placing a large envelope in his casket before it was closed.

When asked by friends how she could do such a thing

She said that she felt obliged to carry out his last wish

So she put all of his money in her bank account

And placed a check for the total amount

With him in the casket.

Anxiety about accumulating wealth or power

is a pursuit valued by many

who might protest

that it does bring them satisfaction – even happiness.

The gospel question, however,

Is whether it brings others joy.

Notice Jesus does not instruct Martha in the gospel

Not to be anxious

Only not to be anxious and worried about many things

Rather than the one important thing:

The abiding presence of God in our midst.

That may be why this gospel is paired with that Genesis reading:

If we are to be anxious about important things

About the welfare of others

About the safety and well-being of our communities

then we are called to be anxious about hospitality

Especially to the unexpected guest

The disguised angel

The unrecognizable Christ.

The Academy award winning film, "the unexpected Lunch Date"

Is about a woman, in Grand Central Station

Who bumps into a man, spills all of her packages

misses her train and loses her wallet.

She makes her way to a cafeteria

scrapes some coins together from the bottom of her purse

buys a salad, gets to a booth

drops all her packages there

and goes back to get a fork.

She comes back to find an apparently homeless man

sitting there eating her salad

When she protests, he keeps on eating

tired and upset she attacks the salad with her fork

the stranger, calm as Mary in the gospel,

continues to eat with her off the same plate.

He eventually gets up

reappears with two cups of coffee

and gives her a cup with sugar

When it’s time to catch her train, she leaves

but then realizes she has left all her packages;

she runs back to the cafeteria

but the man is gone, the shopping bags are gone

only the empty salad plate and coffees cups remain.

Devastated she turns to leave

but then notices a few booths down

her untouched original salad and all her packages.

It dawns on her: the man did not steal her salad

She stole his.

After the Our Father at each Mass

We pray to be safe from all distress

Though I think the previous translation, “undue anxiety”

Is more instructive …

We do not pray that we be delivered from the natural emotions

that punctuate our living fully

But that we might employ them

to spur us into gospel living

And develop holy anxiety for the good things

That render glory to God and joy to others

Through Christ our Lord.