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.