

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost 17 July 2022

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

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

This morning we've heard several examples of how we welcome the Lord to our table and hear God's word, a pretty deep subject for a summer morning. And as we learn about hearing the word of God, we see different examples of hospitality in stories that may be familiar or brand-new to us.

Here are visitors coming to see Biblical characters whose names we might know: Sarah, Abraham, Mary, Martha. And they're stories that may carry deeper messages the more we listen to them, especially our Gospel reading about Jesus, Martha, and Mary.

Let's go first to the Hebrew Scriptures and the story of Abraham, who is visited by either one or three people. The text describes the visitor in different places as being both one *and* three, which may sound familiar to Lutherans who sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" every year on Trinity Sunday. "The Lord" is how the book of Genesis describes the visitor who appears to Abraham in a traditionally sacred place. But Abraham sees three men standing there, who turn out to be angels.

It's a story of welcome; Abraham offers the guests "a little bread," which becomes in his instructions to wife Sarah, a multitude of special cakes. About three bushels of flour's worth! Then he runs and selects a calf to be prepared. Abraham ends up serving a feast, although he doesn't dare join in but stays standing while holy guests eat.

The parting exchange in the reading is a promise from one visitor to surely return, and that Sarah will bear a son. This is such an amazing statement, that a child could be born to this couple in their old age, that a few verses past today's reading Sarah laughs at it. To which the visitor replies, "Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

Many Christian traditions consider this unusual visit from one (or is it three?) people who are the Lord to be an early description of the Holy Trinity. In the Orthodox tradition churches even have artwork portraying the visit of the three angels to Abraham and Sarah over the entrance door.

Hospitality comes up again in our Gospel, written several thousand years later. Luke and John are the only evangelists who tell the story of Jesus visiting Martha and Mary, and Luke's version that we hear today offers fewer details. But it is told from an interesting perspective.

He describes Martha as having her own home, a woman of means like Lydia, the disciple who was a merchant of fine cloth, perhaps reminding his audience that in the church, women can serve. And although in general Luke elevates the role of women in his gospel, this description of Jesus' visit with two sisters may have caused a fair amount of confusion.

It seems as though Jesus favors one sister, Mary, over the other, and then chides Martha for worrying about the wrong things. But those "things" are what women have been traditionally in charge of in many cultures for centuries, the responsibilities of hospitality, organization, and preparing for guests.

So we may struggle with the issue of managing "women's work" or with Jesus saying this work is not "the better part."

Pastor Niveen Sarras, a minister whose background is Palestinian, writes that Jesus is not trying to be a feminist in today's Gospel but does promote a vision of equality: "He's saying that these women have as much to learn and teach as any man; but leaves open the logistics which would, back in their time, be too difficult to digest."

She suggests the practice of hospitality combines both the ministry of Service, known by the Greek word *diakonia*, and the ministry of the Word. Jesus teaches that each ministry requires the other.

Hospitality in Jesus' time, just as in the Middle East today, is about breaking barriers and inviting the guest into the family space. In both cultures, failing to be a good hostess would show disrespect to the guest.

Martha is at work overseeing the material care of the guests, while Mary prefers to listen to Jesus' teaching. It would be very unusual in Jesus' time for a Palestinian Jewish woman to join in learning, as a student would do, "sitting at the Lord's feet and listening." Mary is acting as a disciple, and he allows her to hear the Word of God.

Jesus not only accepts Mary the disciple, he acknowledges Martha's exhaustion and distractions, and invites her to join her sister in learning from him. Then she can resume her other work, perhaps along with her sister.

Jesus describes Mary's choice to hear the Word as a good part that will not be taken away from her, because hearing God's Word *always* inspires believers to serve. The ministry of Diakonia – service - and the ministry of the Word are of equal importance. Saint Luke doesn't value one over the other, and the apostles do engage in both ministries.

The ELCA calls the ministry of diakonia the "ministry of Word and Service." Deacons study the Word of God before they engage fully in service, since Diakonia and the Word require each other.

We know the Church could not survive without Martha. We're not talking about just this one faithful woman, or even the countless women who've served churches by sharing their gifts of hospitality and organization. The Church couldn't get by without the multitude of people, both women and men, who regularly roll up their sleeves in good cheer and get done the work that needs to get done. Just consider the massive preparation that went into our week of Vacation Bible Camp several weeks ago! It was "all hands on deck" as so many participated in the responsibilities of planning, set up, maintenance, and break down of personnel, space and multitudes of "things." It was incredible.

In today's gospel story, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He knows time is limited and his mission is urgent. At this point, Jesus' disciples truly need to attend to his teachings and ministry. Even those disciples who must run the household efficiently to offer hospitality, those who would bury a parent first or say goodbye to their families, need to pay attention to Jesus' words. The time is short!

We face the same today. We get caught up in the details of raising our families and getting our work done. Yet no matter how busy we are, or how preoccupied with current events, we need to attend to Jesus' words. We need to have our assumptions challenged and to be re-

introduced to the God whose power is shown in weakness, whose love triumphs justice, whose peace is achieved without violence.

Saint Luke doesn't describe Martha and Mary as Lazarus' or anybody's sisters. They stand on their own. Jesus addresses them as significant people; Mary chooses to listen to the Word along with a group of men, and isn't scolded for it but is commended. Martha is invited to put aside the work of Diakonia to do the same, to seize time to live beyond her responsibilities.

Amazing things may happen when we stop to listen to Jesus. We're invited to take those interruptions, to see the moments where God's grace surprises us again with the depth of God's love and mercy.

Martha and Mary are invited into full discipleship. Both have contributions to make as significant as those of any disciple. Jesus makes it clear: his words are for all. His call is to all; his invitation is for all. He lives, teaches, dies, and is raised again so we know there is room for all.

And to him together with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.