

Sermon: "The Gift of Hospitality"

Scripture Readings: Psalm 23, Luke 10:38-42

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Our first reading is from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Psalms, selection 23. Most of us are familiar with the shepherd metaphor in this beloved Psalm. However, beginning in verse five, Yahweh is also described as the gracious host. As shepherd, Yahweh brings the flock safely home. As host, Yahweh goes the second mile in providing for and protecting the guests that have come home. This is the Word of God.

*1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures; leads me beside still waters; 3 restores my soul. The Lord leads me in right paths for God's name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

Our second reading is Luke 10:38-42. Here Luke records the interaction between two sisters and how they respond to their dear friend Jesus who came into their home from a place of sorrow. Hear now, the Word of God.

*38 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "The Gift of Hospitality"

*The text: "... a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home." Luke 10:38b*

Let us pray. Loving Host and Friend, give us the grace to be to one another as you are to each one of us, open and caring. May we offer comfort and refuge to strangers, to acquaintances and to our brothers and sisters in Christ. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

Hospitality, the *Interpreter's Dictionary* reminds us, was recognized as a sacred duty throughout the ancient Mediterranean world and more heartily kept than many written laws. Although the word does not appear in the Hebrew Scriptures, the custom is evidenced in the stories, particularly in the patriarchal stories. In Genesis 18, it was the sojourner or the stranger whom Sarah and Abraham welcomed as a guest that brought the good news of life and of the son God would give them. In Genesis 19, the strangers that Lot welcomes into his home and protects bring the warning to leave Sodom with his family, saving their lives. The strangers in these stories are portrayed as angels or messengers of God who reward the gracious host after keeping the sacred duty of hospitality.

The practice of hospitality as a sacred duty in the ancient world did not originate with the hope that all strangers were angels, however, but rather with the fear, the very real fear, that every stranger was a potential enemy. The nomadic lifestyle of the ancient people meant every host that welcomed a stranger never knew when he would be the stranger that needed a safe haven in another land.

This sacred duty by turning the “hosts” or the enemy into the “hospes” or the guest offered survival for all who lived in a primitive and dangerous world. The guest was treated with respect and honor, water for his feet, rest and a generous meal. His animals were tended and he also enjoyed protection, even if he was the enemy, for three days and thirty-six hours after eating with his host. The time sustained by his food.

Hospitality was to the Nomad or the Bedouin what almsgiving was to the later Jews – an expression of righteousness. And so the metaphor of Yahweh as gracious host in Psalm 23 would have been as familiar and as relevant to these ancient Hebrews as the metaphor of shepherding.

The practice of hospitality in the New Testament continued to play a significant role – providing the background for many of the details in the life of Jesus and the early Christian community. Jesus was dependent on hospitality for his daily care and lodging and hospitality made the extensive missionary journeys of Paul possible. The early churches experienced a sense of unity because of the gift of hospitality offered to one another – strangers being welcomed and honored. But it was no longer the fear of an uncertain world that united them. Rather, it was their faith in Jesus Christ and they became known as the people of the Way.

According to Henri Nouwen in his book *Reaching Out*: “... the biblical stories help us realize not just that hospitality is an important virtue, but even more that in the context of hospitality, in an open space, guest and host can reveal their most precious gifts and bring new life to each other.” (pg. 47)

This leads us to our gospel reading and to ask the necessary questions about the seemingly harsh interaction between Jesus and Martha. What was wrong with Martha’s expression of hospitality? Why didn’t Jesus appreciate her solicitous care but rather criticize her for being too particular?

My sister, who is the mother of three boys and is married to a minister in the Reformed Church of America, gave me some good advice on preaching this passage while we were sitting around her kitchen table one day. *I hope you don’t put Martha down, she said, I get so tired of Martha getting criticized in that story. Where would the church be without the Marthas?* My sister, Mar-, I mean, Becky, is a gracious hostess and among those who, because they identify more closely with Martha, feel belittled and unappreciated in this story. It is to the Marthas of the church, who attend to the details of hospitality that I would like to dedicate these reflections.

We must be careful not to oversimplify our interpretation and read things into this story that are not there. It is not a commentary on how many dishes to serve one’s guests. Neither was it intended to criticize or belittle women who work in the kitchen and elevate those who do not lend a helping hand. Sadly, when Scripture is read without an understanding of the historical and cultural context, stories which were intended to communicate important truths about the love of God become relegated to simple and sometimes trite lessons that can be judgmental and hurtful.

When we take a look at the larger scheme in the Book of Luke, we see that Christ's visit to these two sisters of Lazarus follows the sharp turn of events toward Jerusalem recorded in Chapter 9. Jesus is aware that the cross awaits him there. Not even the Son of God is spared the anxiety and grief of life's ending. No wonder it is at this time that Christ's words become more intense. He feared for himself but overshadowing this, he feared for his friends— the men and women he loved and would leave behind to build the church.

In the smaller scheme, a relatively young man with the weight of the world (literally) on his shoulders takes time to seek solace and comfort – “a resting place” with two women who were like sisters to him, two women with whom he could be himself.

He needed to talk and he had some things he wanted to say and to teach. We would be amiss without recognizing the fact that Jesus' teaching a woman made this story outrageous. Luke did not include this incident in his writings to infer that Jesus favored the least helpful sister but to make a statement about the discipleship of women and he didn't want Martha to miss the point. We forget in this time and culture that Rabbis did not allow women to “set at their feet.” They feared that too much knowledge would keep women out of the kitchen. Christ offered Martha freedom from the kitchen because he knew what we celebrate in our time... that knowledge and opportunity do not prevent women from choosing hospitality; but rather enhance this gift because more than ever it is a choice.

We need not be too critical of Martha for her attention to details, or Mary, for that matter, because she chose to sit at Jesus' feet. There is a time to go and do and there is a time to listen and reflect. Both are necessary in the gift of hospitality.

True hospitality is being sensitive to the needs of guests. What Jesus needed more than anything else at this time in his life was simplicity and someone who would listen to him. He was acutely aware of the cross before him and that this was likely his last visit with Mary and Martha.

It seems fair to say that Martha was unaware of Christ's feelings. Perhaps she was too busy to notice; perhaps her busyness was a way to avoid feeling the pain she feared. The despair of his sorrow surely touched her own. Her criticism of Mary leads us to believe that her sister was exactly where Martha wanted to be and needed to be... at her friend's side. Sadly, the internal shoulds of hospitality kept her from offering her guest what he needed most: the comfort of her friendship and the freedom to feel his sorrow.

Unfortunately, through the years the church community has not always provided the kind of hospitality where people are free to feel the despair that is sometimes a part of our life circumstances. Too often when people are in crisis, they distance themselves from the church because they fear they will be judged or criticized.

May we, individually and as a congregation, seek to be sensitive to the people who come through the doors of our homes. May we be willing to meet them in their places of sorrow as well as their places of joy because Christ has met us in ours. May our cups overflow with goodness and mercy as we embrace the sacred duty of hospitality and delight in the gifts we have to offer in one another's presence. So be it. Amen.