



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE
THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 21, 2019
GENESIS 18:1-10a; PSALM 15; COLOSSIANS 1:15-28; LUKE 10:38-42

HOLY HOSPITALITY

LUKE 10:38-42 *[As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."]*

A little over 25 years ago, my husband and I celebrated our fifth wedding anniversary in New York City. We had recently moved into a new apartment out of graduate student housing and, for the first time, were both employed. So, we wanted to do something special, and since it was also New Year's Eve, we made a dinner party out of it. I was thrilled when three of our closest college friends said they would travel to be with us.

I got up early on the 31st, filled with elaborate plans for the special dinner we'd

have. I shopped for groceries and flowers while my husband cleaned the apartment.

Our friends arrived late morning, but there was still so much to do, I asked Will to take them out to the park for the afternoon so I could cook. I remember rushing around, trying to decipher unfamiliar recipes, squeezing chairs around a too-small table, and fumbling with flowers that wouldn't fit the vase that was a wedding gift.

I also remember mixed feelings: excitement for the evening ahead, but also pressure for it all to go well, and grumpiness that I was doing the work alone. I also glimpsed my perfectionism and worry about reconnecting with these friends whom we hadn't seen in a while. It was a splash of cold water. By the

time Will and our friends got back from the park, I had made different, less elaborate, plans.

So, I really resonate with today's gospel. I have great compassion for Martha, who when she hears that Jesus – the one she calls “Lord” -- has arrived in Bethany, immediately welcomes him into her home. Or more literally, she “receives” him into her home. There is a difference there.

After he is settled, she gets busy with preparations, and becomes anxious and distracted. The story says that instead of asking her sister for help, she goes straight to Jesus. “Lord, do you not care? I am alone in my work.” And Jesus replies kindly, “Martha, I see you are worried about many things. There is only one thing that is necessary. Mary knows what is good for her, and it won't be taken away.”

I want to set aside some of the superficial interpretations of this story we've heard in the past. Ones that create a division between the contemplative or active life. And ones that hinge on a critique of female anxiety. Because there is so much more depth in the details.

First, the translation we hear today of what's going on with Martha is that she is “distracted by her many tasks,” which brings up the image of someone who is getting lost in the little things, stuck in the weeds of women's work. Not unlike my memory of that anniversary dinner years ago.

But the Greek word that Luke uses for what Martha is doing is “*diakonia*.” It literally means service. Substantive, life-giving service, what we would call ministry. We get

the word “deacon” from *diakonia*. And it is used repeatedly for the mission of the apostles, the ones who serve in Jesus' name. *Diakonia* is what Martha is about, too.

So, to understand Martha as getting needlessly hung up on domestic performance misses the mark. Martha stands in the ancient

¹ Hebrew tradition of hospitality, where the unexpected arrival is always welcomed, cared for, and treated as an honored guest.



¹ Christ in the House of Mary and Martha by Otto von Veen (1556–1629).

Some of the origins of this tradition were in the first reading. Immediately after Abraham seals his covenant with God, the Lord appears to him in the form of three strangers. Abraham runs to greet them, and bowing down, promises a little water and bread if they will stay for a while.

But he and Sarah produce a feast – cakes, curds, milk and meat – served in the shade of the oak tree. Before these guests leave, they bless Abraham and Sarah, confirming Sarah will bear a son. This is the story behind the saying, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”²

Martha is following Abraham’s example, receiving into her home the one she knows as Lord. She wants to serve Jesus, but she finds herself restless. When Martha asks Jesus if he cares that she works alone, I don’t hear resentment so much as I hear longing to be close to the one who brings the kingdom of God near. “Lord, I want to be with you, too. Make Mary help me, so we can both hear your good news for us.”

Jesus responds to Martha that Mary has chosen the “good” part (a more accurate translation than the “better” part) and that

Mary will not be denied it. It is a confirmation of Mary’s rightful place among his disciples. It is also a response to Martha’s longing and an invitation to claim her place with Jesus, too. And it is affirmation that the core of hospitality is not about the quality of the food or the size of the table, but the relationship between host and guest. That human connection in which one is fully seen, deeply heard, and feels safe in the intimate space of another. *Diakonia*.

It is vulnerable to be a guest in someone else’s home, to sleep in an unfamiliar place and be dependent on the host for basic needs. But it is vulnerable to be a host, too. Whether the guest is expected or not, we are receiving the unknown, desiring to provide nourishment and comfort, but uncertain what the guest requires. We open ourselves to an encounter that we cannot control and to a person whose needs may be beyond our capabilities.

There are many ways this community regularly practices hospitality, serving Eucharistic visitees, Noel House guests, Sanctuary residents, children on the carpet, and the Seattle Service Corps. And now on Sunday mornings, different ministries provide hospitality after each service, offering not only refreshments but a gracious welcome to all.

² Hebrews 13:2.

And with the growing needs of our unsheltered neighbors here on Capitol Hill, the vestry has encouraged the Justice Ministries leadership and all others who are interested to explore a front-door ministry of hospitality – one that greets and assists those who come here on weekdays seeking connection and care for basic needs. One that builds relationship, because relationship is the core of hospitality. *Diakonia*.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Martha receives him into her home, acting the role of host. She springs into action apart from Jesus until her desire for the presence of God draws her back. And in their encounter,

Jesus becomes the host and Mary and Martha are the guests. He nourishes them with words and witness and binds them together in communion.

This is how it is with our ministries of hospitality, too. In Eucharistic visits, at Noel House and more, we enter as hosts, but when we attend to the human encounter, we realize that Christ is our host, and we and those we serve are guests together at God's table of mercy and love. May we own our real vulnerability in this and lean into it as we seek to follow Christ. Amen.



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