

6 Pentecost, Proper 11, Yr. C

July 21, 2019

Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

These Scriptures are tailor made for us. I say that because when we describe ourselves as a church we often use words like welcoming and hospitable; and when visitors describe their experience with us, they often use those same words. So the Genesis reading and the gospel give us a perfect opportunity to look more closely at the idea, indeed the GIFT of hospitality.

The Genesis story has Abraham and Sarah camping at Mamre and while the text begins by telling us that it was the Lord who came, to Abraham it was just three men standing near him. His desert hospitality immediately kicked in – that hospitality that nomadic people still practice today – when a stranger appears, you welcome them and share what you have. It turns out, of course, that there aren't just three men, but the Lord and two angels and they come bearing a gift, a renewed promise that Abraham and Sarah will indeed have the promised child. It's one of several pictures of hospitality in the Hebrew Scriptures. Hospitality, welcoming and caring for the alien were considered essential behaviors, often meaning the difference between life and death.

And then there's Martha and Mary in Luke's Gospel. For a long time, the church interpreted this story as a choice between the contemplative life and the active life, thinking that the contemplative life was what Jesus was talking about when he said that Mary had chosen the better part. But that interpretation is too facile, especially when you remember that the parable just before this is about the Good Samaritan – and there Jesus was urging ACTION. There it wasn't about sitting and listening; instead all the verbs in that scripture are action words: seeing, stopping, bandaging, lifting, taking, paying, promising. And you'll remember the end of that section, when Jesus tells the questioning lawyer that he'll gain eternal life by GOING and DOING LIKEWISE. So to interpret the Mary/Martha story as insisting only on quiet meditation doesn't really work, because we just heard the opposite. So what's going on?

Scholars today offer a different interpretation. Mary was indeed sitting at Jesus' feet, which was the language used to describe how a disciple of a rabbi would have sat at the feet of his teacher. To sit in such a way was to indicate that you wanted to learn, indeed that you yourself wanted to be a Rabbi. So what we have here is an illustration of Jesus breaking yet another social and cultural barrier – two, actually, because the text begins by saying that it was Martha's home. So Jesus was mis-stepping right off the bat by visiting the home of a woman. And then, of course, there was the situation with Mary. Martha may have well been setting the plates on the table with an audible bang – part of that could have been because she was trying to figure out what to do with a crowd that showed up for dinner (you'll note it says that it was Jesus AND his disciples), but partly it could also have been because Mary was breaking the rules. Just as houses at that time (and still in some parts of the world) were physically divided into male and female areas, roles were strictly divided as well and Mary was crossing an invisible but very real barrier.

And you'll have noted in reading this Gospel that Jesus isn't criticizing Martha for tending to the needs of her guest. Instead, he gently points out that she's worried and distracted and thereby missing the one thing that matters. He doesn't say what that one thing is, however. If we were to hold this reading up in one hand and the Good Samaritan reading in the other and ask Jesus who was better, my guess is he'd just say "YES." Because the one thing that matters is keeping our focus on Jesus, and by doing that and looking at every situation in light of that focus, we'll come to understand that in some situations action is required and in others, sitting, listening and praying is what's necessary. We need them both. Richard Rohr sees the spiritual life as a movement between prayer and action – we should pray so deeply that we're forced into engagement with the world and then, because we've engaged the world so completely, we're forced back to prayer for strength and sustenance. Martha lost her focus – what she was missing was that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and to certain death and because of that, what he needed was the hospitality of companionship and care – the hospitality around food wasn't what was

needed at this moment – that need could have been satisfied by sending out for the equivalent of a 1<sup>st</sup> century pizza.

The theology of hospitality seen in these two readings is just as relevant today as it was then. Henri Nouwen wrote a book titled *Reaching Out* in 1975. In that book he described the movement from hostility to hospitality as essential to our spiritual growth. But for him, as for Jesus, hospitality means more than serving food and drink. It means that, of course, but at a deeper level, it means having an attitude of openness, welcome, if you will, toward those we regard as strangers and even beyond that, an openness toward all of life. In 1975 Nouwen was concerned about our society which he said was “increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people...looking at the world with suspicion...always expecting an enemy to appear and do them harm....” I wonder what he’d say about that today. As a good example, no matter what you think of things like concealed carry laws, I don’t think anyone can argue that an armed citizenry is a good example of how much more fearful of one another we have become. Nouwen points out that our vocation is to turn enemies into friends, to move from hostility toward the stranger to hospitality. And the words are really close together. Both are derived from the Latin: “hostis” is the enemy; “hospes” is the word for friend. He’s clear about how difficult this can be – partly because of our assumption that the stranger is a potential danger, but also because in our increasingly competitive society, it’s easy to see even colleagues as threats to our economic well-being.

For Nouwen, hospitality is preparing a space so that people can encounter God’s word and presence. What do we have to do to make that happen? What do people need to really hear God’s word? Sometimes it’s the physical stuff, like the injured man in the Good Samaritan parable. Sometimes it’s attention, or companionship; sometimes it’s acceptance and a place to belong. Always it’s respect. That’s what has to happen to create that hospitable place and to get there, we have to be ready to get past our fear, to see the other as bringing us a gift – maybe the gift of awareness, or insight, or deeper understanding. We have to be able to suspend judgment – to give the stranger the benefit of the doubt.

And, like Martha, we need to keep our focus on Jesus and not “be busy and distracted” by too many things. It’s been said that the disease of our age is “continuous partial attention.” Some Thomas Friedman, the NYT columnist, wrote about taking a taxi from DE Gaulle Airport into Paris. He said that during the ride, he and the taxi driver were both busy. The driver was driving the cab, talking on his cell phone and watching a video (this last making Friedman a bit nervous) while he himself, in the back of the cab, was working on his laptop and listening to his iPod. What they never did, he said, was talk to each other.

Compare that story with one Parker Palmer wrote in his book about democracy. He also wrote about a taxi driver, this one in New York City. He said that as they raced uptown at a dangerous clip, he asked the driver how he liked his job. Turned out he loved it. He said that it could be a little dangerous because you never knew who was getting into the cab. But, he said you got to meet a lot of people “...which teaches you a lot in life...You exchange ideas...Meeting all these different kind of people, everything helps. It doesn’t hurt. If you only like one kind of people, it’s no good! We talk, if I have a better idea, I tell ‘em! Maybe they say yes, maybe they say no – that’s how I educate myself; it makes me happy....If you’re with the same kind of people all the time, it’s like wearing the same suit all the time – you get sick of it. But the public – that keeps you alive!” (*Healing the Heart of Democracy*) Palmer is talking about the kind of openness and communication we need to keep our democracy healthy. Nouwen is talking about the kind of openness and trust we need to have toward the “other” if we want to mature into Christ and obey the great commandments to love God and neighbor. It seems like today we’re being given the opportunity to exercise this openness more than ever before.

I think we rightly name our gift at St. Luke’s the gift of hospitality. These scriptures are an invitation to us to look at that more deeply, to see it as something we are perhaps being called to, both here in Door County and beyond – something that will ask us to reflect on how that openness, that attentiveness, that presence can move us deeper into the heart of God and something that we can offer to a hurting and lonely world.

Amen.