

St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Pentecost 9, Proper 11  
July 17, 2016. Genesis 18:1-10a, Luke 10:38-42 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

If there's one central theme in the readings we've just shared, it's perhaps the thing that lies at the heart of human community: hospitality. And there's no accident that part of that word - the first part - is "hospital" - a place where we go or are taken when we are not well; a place where others work to restore us, in spite of what we may have done or what may have been done to us that got us there in the first place.

Abraham and Sarah as hosts extend a generous and heart-felt hospitality to the mysterious visitors in our first reading, and out of that simple moment comes great generosity from the guests: the promise of new life unlooked for and unexpected.

For us, their story is a reminder that our stance as Christians toward others is to be an outward-facing and hospitable one: to welcome others in every practical way we know of. This is standard fare in the bible, where Hebrews says "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." And that comes from the Torah (Deut 10: 18-19) which reminds the Israelites that their hospitality must extend especially to those whom the rest of the world dismisses as worthless, symbolized by the four famous categories: widows, orphans, strangers, and aliens. Today, that list might be single mothers, children of drug-addicted parents, Muslims, and Mexicans. We're living in a time when the outward-facing Judeo-Christian orientation that focuses on extending hospitality to those at the bottom of the social pile is under challenge. In those moments when you're confronted by those in need, think of the call of our faith to love and hospitality stated in Hebrews and symbolized by Abraham and Sarah's outward-facing hospitality, and of the new life that came to them - and can come to us - as a result.

Today's gospel reading is also about hospitality - that of Mary and Martha. The story takes us deeper into the meaning not only of hospitality but also of the identity that lies behind it for us as Christians. Because this reading tells us a lot about the way things are to be in the Kingdom of God. At first, you might think that the story simply confirms gender stereotypes - the man comes in and "puts his feet up" so to speak, while at least one of the women runs around in the kitchen getting his food ready!

Yet this is a much more profound story. In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Mediterranean culture men never visited a home where there would only be women present - so Jesus has already broken a major social taboo. And while Martha - probably the older sister - acts the part of the mother hen by rushing around to prepare a meal, Mary, on the other hand, sits at Jesus' feet to listen to what he has to say. And finally, when Martha can stand it no more, she invites Jesus to rebuke Mary: "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand." That's an open invitation from Martha to Jesus to remind Mary of her proper place as a woman - in the kitchen. Only men sat at the feet of a teacher and listened to him. The Jewish men of Jesus' time would never have allowed a woman to do so - it contravened the Torah, they said, to allow a woman to learn about the Law.

Yet here Mary is, filling the role of a disciple, and Jesus does nothing to discourage her - in fact, in what follows, he does the opposite - he insists that she is in her rightful place as a human being. In the Kingdom of God there are no strangers or aliens, no widows and orphans, in the sense that there are no second-class citizens, there's no glass ceiling - to be a follower of Jesus is to embrace an egalitarian vision where our roles differ but our value before God and each other is exactly the same.

At the same time, this is not a story proclaiming that contemplation is better than service; if everyone chose Mary's posture there'd be a lot of hungry folk out there, and Christians would - rightly - be censured for being all talk and no action! That was, in fact, exactly Jesus' criticism of the religious establishment when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. If they really wanted to get to the heart of faith they needed not just to focus on worship in the Temple but to engage in acts of compassionate love, to "go and **DO** likewise, as Jesus instructed the lawyer last week.

At the heart of this story, then, is seeing the ministry of hospitality as being more than simply a preoccupation with being a good host. The old ways of being hospitable, Jesus is saying, are passing away - the roles of those who were considered second-class, symbolized by the women in this story - are changing. They can still be good hosts, but only if they understand themselves first - and are understood first - as being good disciples. And, in fact, Jesus only speaks to Martha in this story because Martha does, only because what was for Martha a labor of love has become a cry of pain, only because she was developing a "martyr complex," only because she didn't grasp the core of his message: that he came - and comes - to inaugurate a truly radical equality that comes from God

One takeaway for us as individuals and as members of individual faith communities is that it's dangerous to make assumptions that traditional roles and expectations can remain unaffected by the presence of the Holy in our lives. Another is that those of us who are at the top of the ladder - starting with white men! - are called to embrace and treat as equals who are not at the top of the ladder - everyone else, and especially those who have been treated as less than equal, less than family. Events such as those we have experienced in our nation in the last weeks, and elsewhere in the world all the time - especially most recently in France - tell the tale of what happens when we fail in our calling to be hospitable people.

And so, once again, we learn that all bets are off when it comes to Jesus - the moment we think we've got him pegged we discover - to our surprise - that our world just got turned upside down. Again!

This new way of understanding hospitality takes practice, and teamwork. It's why Jesus didn't 'go it alone,' he called people to him and invited them to be a part of what he saw as his work in this life: bring good news to those who desperately needed good news.

And it's why he placed such a value on hospitality - because true hospitality creates relationship, and relationship creates community, and it's in community that we can experience our deepest joys and share our deepest sorrows; it's in community where we can learn what it means to be fully human, and discover the joys of sharing that wonderful gift with those who struggle in the

shadows to find meaning, and peace, and joy in their own lives.

This is why, I think, that everywhere Jesus went he was always throwing parties; eating with people who most of us “nice folk” wouldn’t want to be seen dead near, for fear that someone might see us, and begin to “talk!” The categories the gospels describe – usually “prostitutes and sinners” – are often misleading, because we don’t always understand who he really spent time with; today it would be gang-bangers and drug dealers, and illegal immigrants, and Muslims. But let’s not forget that he also ate with upright religious progressives (the Pharisees), religious conservatives, and – more frequently – with ordinary salt-of-the-earth working folk. Everyone was welcome at Jesus’ table! Everyone *is* welcome at Jesus’ table! That’s the true richness of the community of the Kingdom of God. For Jesus we’re all children of God – each in our own way wayward, perhaps, but equally deserving of God’s grace – because (who knows) with a little bit of the “hospital” that’s a part of hospitality, they, and we, who (each in our own ways) are not well might be restored to wholeness, and they, and we, who are (by someone else) feared as “other” might together be embraced as brothers and sisters.

Now that’s really good news.