

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 21, 2019

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

Sermon by Jim O'Grady

For a long time, whenever I heard today's gospel reading, I felt uncomfortable with Martha's complaint about her sister Mary. I think at least a part of this was a guilty conscience about not having done more to pull my weight at home, both growing up and as an adult. Perhaps it's in the nature of childhood not to appreciate what your parents do for you. I know I took for granted the many meals my mother cooked for us. And perhaps the black humor she occasionally deployed in the dinner call was a response to our failure to acknowledge her efforts: "Come and get it before I throw it out." An article last month in *The Guardian*, entitled "Want to be a male ally? Start by helping to clean the house," only reinforced my feelings. The author stated that in spite of many years of heightened efforts toward gender equality, "women still do much more housework, eldercare, and childcare than men," and that this diminishes women's quality of life and can have negative health effects.

That's a significant insight, and one deserving of further discussion, but it won't be the direct focus of my reflections today. In fixating on Martha, of course I missed the point of Luke's story. I hope you don't tune me out when I say that I'm going to speak about hospitality and what it means to be hospitable, and that you don't assume I'm going to talk in clichés. I won't be giving advice a la Emily Post, detailing rules of proper etiquette. In light of today's readings, I think hospitality is the beginning of communication, understanding, respect, and ultimately love.

I have a personal story about hospitality. My wife loves to embarrass me by telling people about one of our first dates. I prepared vegetarian lasagna for her. It was

pretty good as I recall; I think she enjoyed the meal and the fact that I had made it for her. In her recounting, she implies—outright states, really—that it was the last time I cooked for her. Alice eventually must have felt she was a victim of false advertising—she assumed she had encountered a Martha, but she ended up with a kind of Mary. It's not exactly true that I never cooked again, but it's certainly a fact that my wife does the lion's share, and more, of meal prep to this day. I hope I'm not trivializing scripture when I say that maybe today's gospel can serve as inspiration for addressing what equality means across the spectrum of our family and social relationships.

Today's reading from Genesis vividly paints a picture of the significance of hospitality in human culture. Abraham invites three strangers into his home, welcoming them and mobilizing his wife and servant to assist him. Translations variously identify the guests as men and angels, and one as God. Old Testament professor Richard Clifford suggests that this fluidity describes both the nearness and the elusiveness of God. In exact detail, the writer describes the "sumptuous meal" that Abraham has laid out for the visitors. This reminds me of a verse from the Letter to the Hebrews in the King James translation—"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." The tendency these days is to be suspicious of strangers, or to assume that those asking for help are out to scam us.

When I began working as a librarian, what was to become a standard reference resource for many libraries had recently been published. It was called *How to be a Perfect Stranger*. While its subtitle was *The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook*, it made the broader point that since we may interact with a diversity

of persons, we can be aware of and more sensitive to the customs and practices of those whose cultures differ from our own. For the purposes of my reflections today, I'd like to modify that title in a couple of ways. In deference to Martha, I could go with *How to be a Perfect Host*. I would never ignore or slight Martha—in fact, I find myself identifying deeply with her. It seems that we're both perfectionists and detail-oriented, unfortunately at times to such an extent that the focus becomes our efforts in themselves, rather than the persons our efforts are directed toward. Perhaps a corrective would be to look at the title from the perspective of Jesus—*How to be a Perfect Guest*. Martha has doubts about this, and apparently thinks Jesus would be a much better guest if he supported her by encouraging Mary to do her part.

Along with several St. Augustine's parishioners, Alice and I recently made a Celtic Christian pilgrimage to Wales and Ireland. We met again a people known for their hospitality. A look at their history demonstrates that the Irish seem well aware of both the nearness and elusiveness of God. Daniel O'Connell, the great 19th century fighter for Catholic emancipation known as The Liberator, had this to say about his fellow Irish—"[Their] hospitality . . . is not the running account of posted and ledgered courtesies, as in other countries; it springs, like all their qualities—their faults, their virtues—directly from the heart." While he couldn't know the expression, O'Connell was offering a critique of that contradiction in terms, the "hospitality industry." Martha, while she's not operating a for-profit business, seems nonetheless to be keeping something of a "running account of posted and ledgered courtesies." I'm not a fan of Internet memes—I find most of them trite and simplistic—but a Facebook friend's recent re-posting, coincidentally from a Celtic Christian site, could have given Martha some food for thought—"Hospitality

is not about inviting people into our perfect homes; it is all about inviting people into our imperfect hearts.”

It illuminates today’s gospel reading to know that the words hospitality, hospitable, hospice, hospital, and host all derive from the same Latin root. As with the fluidity of persons in the reading from Genesis, that root can refer either to host or guest. This dual meaning comes from the ancient custom of reciprocity, which we’re cognizant of down to the present—a guest on one occasion is usually expected to act as a host on another occasion. And in a further echo of Genesis, the root word can also refer to a stranger or foreigner. Even the word history of “host” in the sense of eucharistic bread is ultimately related to the courtesy extended to a guest, who often was a foreigner or stranger, a potential adversary who is received as a friend.

Of course, Martha doesn’t have an etymology lesson in mind when she appeals to Jesus. She fails to recognize the power in being at once a host and a guest. It’s a relationship that her sister appears to have entered into unreservedly. The guest Jesus is a host to the concerns and heart of Mary. The gospel writer we know as Luke shows us a Jesus with an unusual sensitivity to women, which seems embodied in his encounter with Mary. And there can be little doubt that for Jesus, his moments with Mary were a welcome respite from the rigors of his ministry. It’s this mutual loving exchange which is the one needful thing, the better choice that’s been made and which isn’t to be second-guessed.

What’s this mean for us Christians? Augustine of Hippo said that “If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying

‘Amen’ to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. When you hear ‘the Body of Christ,’ you reply ‘Amen.’ Be a member of Christ's body, then, so that your ‘Amen’ may ring true!” In commenting on this statement, Fr. Edward Kilmartin has written that the eucharist is “a deepening of one’s being in Christ we do not so much receive Christ, rather, he receives us and grafts us more deeply into his body.” I saw several examples of this mutuality on our pilgrimage. The most vivid was a visit to Solas Bhríde (Brigid’s Flame), a spirituality center in Kildare, operated by the Brigidine Sisters. Brigid is one of Ireland’s most beloved saints. In the fifth century, she established a monastery for men and women, a place which became a center of education, pilgrimage, and worship. As abbess, Brigid had the status of bishop—not as a princely figure lording it over inferiors, but as a friend of the poor, a peacemaker whose spirit of hospitality was legendary. That spirit lives on in the sisters and volunteers we met in Kildare. Brigid’s flame indeed radiates in the kindness and sincerity of the women who welcome visitors to Solas Bhríde. And their words to us made it clear that they regarded our presence with them as a gift. It felt entirely fitting that our presider at Eucharist was a woman, Leslie, a fellow pilgrim, a retired Anglican priest from Australia.

Our epistle reading today is one of a series of four consecutive selections in the current Sunday lectionary cycle from the Letter to the Colossians. In it, Paul insists that the church is authentic when Christ is at home in all believers. If Christ finds a welcome in his people, we can’t help but share him with the guests who come to us in church and in life. Paul, like Augustine, talks about a mystery, one hidden through the ages, but now revealed to believers. These references to mystery bring to mind a standing joke from my seminary days—an adequate response to a

theological question that we were unable to answer with certainty was “it’s a mystery.” But that little attempt at a humorous approach to serious issues had more than a grain of truth: namely that mystery does not mean unintelligibility, but a depth of meaning. The author of Colossians recognized this, when he wrote of the “glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. we proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” It’s Christ the church proclaims; it’s not about Martha, or Mary, or Jim, or the sisters of Solas Bhríde, but Christ in us, the hope of glory. This is what it means to be fully mature in Christ. Some translations say to be **perfect** in Christ; there’s that pesky, discomfort-making word again!

There’s a banner hanging at the entrance to this church building: “No Matter Where You are on Your Journey, You are Welcome Here.” That’s a beautiful statement. But will our guests find God near or elusive in our presence? We need to be careful not to be self-satisfied; we need to remind ourselves about reciprocity, that we are both hosts and guests, that those we welcome may in fact give us more than we give them. When we proclaim that all are welcome in this place, we’re saying that the only perfection we claim is as the Body of Christ, when the spirit Jesus lives in us. That will be an inspiration for our guests, and a good reminder for us, to commit and re-commit from our imperfect hearts to be perfect hosts, to be perfect guests, no matter where we are or who we meet.