

## **“Radical Hospitality”**

**FPC Marshfield, 6<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost, July 17, 2022**

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Texts: Genesis 18:1-10a, (Ps. 15), (Colossians 1:15-28), Luke 10:38-42

Which is more important, offering hospitality or listening to the gospel? Both of our stories address those questions. In Luke, we find Jesus and his disciples, on their way to Jerusalem, visiting in the home of Martha and Mary. There is no mention of Lazarus in this story. In John, we find the three of them living together, but not in Luke. In First Century Palestine, it was usually left to the women to do the food preparation for guests, while the men discussed and debated the issues of the day. In this story, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, absorbing his teachings, while Martha is busy with her tasks of hospitality. She asks Jesus to tell Mary to come and help with the preparations, but Jesus tells Martha to relax; she is too worried and distracted by the many things she is trying to do by herself. It sounds like Jesus is inviting Martha to join the circle and listen to what he has to say, too. Jesus often includes women among his disciples and includes them in his teachings.

We don't know exactly what Jesus has to say to Mary and the other disciples, but this story follows the parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus shows that sometimes it is those that we regard as outsiders who do the right thing. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was dangerous but busy. The priest and the Levite, for whatever reason, did not stop to help the man who had been beaten and robbed, whereas it was the Samaritan, not a person beloved by Jews, who stopped to help the man and see to his welfare. All of Jesus' preaching seems to lead to an understanding of the Kingdom of God, where all are included and justice and peace is the goal. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is part of the Greatest Commandment, and neighbors include all of humanity.

Hospitality is important, too. That is why the church has had deacons, from the beginning, as is described in Acts 6:1-7, the number of Jesus' followers had grown considerably, so seven men were appointed to serve the widows and orphans and others in need. They included both Jews and Greeks. They were all men. No women were appointed, though it seems today that more women are elected to be deacons than men. Our church has a fairly good distribution of men and women who are serving as deacons. *Diakonia* is a Greek word for those who serve.

In the ancient world, travelers were dependent on the hospitality of those they encountered along the way. There were few inns where people could stay, so most found accommodation with friends or even strangers. Mary and Martha were friends of Jesus who lived only a few miles from Jerusalem, so they were likely prospects for providing accommodations. According to Luke and the other Synoptic gospels, Jesus made only one trip to Jerusalem and it was there that he faced crucifixion. At this point

in the gospel, he has a great deal more teaching and healing to offer before he begins to be a threat to the temple leaders and the Roman authorities, which causes them to seek to get rid of him.

Our story from Genesis is also about hospitality. Three men appear before Abraham's tent in the heat of the day, and immediately Abraham offered to have the servants wash their feet and prepare food for them. He asked Sarah to prepare cakes and went to his herd and selected an especially nice calf. He asked the servants to kill it and prepare it for dinner. Abraham does not prepare the food himself but gives the tasks to Sarah and his servants. He does not eat with them but sits with them under a tree while they refresh themselves. They ask, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" She was looking out of the tent. The men said, "We will return in due time, and Sarah will have a son so that the promise for you to have an heir will be fulfilled." Remember that Abraham and Sarah were extremely old, Abraham nearly 100 and Sarah 90, well past childbearing age. Yet, "Nothing is impossible for the Lord." This is one of several stories in scripture where women bear a child in old age. These children often have significance for Israel. We think of Hannah, who became the mother of Samuel the prophet in her old age and of Elizabeth, who was the mother of John the Baptizer. It is a common theme in scripture, since the primary purpose of women in ancient times was to bear children.

Once I preached on this and there was a couple in their late forties or early fifties who has recently married. They said afterward that I had them worried with that story. Later, they adopted her grandson, so in a way the story did come true for them.

Because there were three men who appeared to Abraham and Sarah, this story has become an early symbol of the Trinity. An icon of the Russian iconographer in the 15<sup>th</sup> century is one of the best known of all Orthodox icons. It has three figures, each dressed in different colors, gold the color of the Father, blue the color of the human, and green, representative of the Spirit. They are sitting around a table, with a bowl on it. In front, below the top, is a little square. This is thought to be a place where a mirror once was. In other words, there is a place at the table for all of us, for we can see ourselves as part of the divine dance of the trinity. Trinity is about relationships, including us. This image is fully discussed in a book by the Franciscan priest and director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, N.M., entitled, The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation. The book group will be discussing it in February.

Action and contemplation: both of these are the point of today's message. In the gospel story, Martha represents the model of action: offering hospitality, seeking to serve those in need, seeking peace and justice for all; whereas Mary represents the model of contemplation. She is listening and learning from Jesus. Prayer, especially contemplative prayer, is part of this model. Lectio divina, a meditative reading of scripture so that we might be open to what it has to say to us, is another part.

Silence is part of meditative practice, and also certain types of music, such as Taize chants and short musical pieces from the Iona community in Scotland. As I said two weeks ago, our church is especially noted for our action, for our stance for peace and justice and serving those in need. We are also noted for hospitality, for welcoming all into our midst. However, we could probably use a little improvement in our practices of spiritual growth. Once I led a service of Taize chants, contemplative reading of scripture, and silence in this church. Someone was heard to say afterward, "I didn't leave the Catholic Church for this!" I don't believe the Catholic Church has a monopoly on spirituality, and besides these practices are ecumenical. Howard Rice, who was moderator of General Assembly in 1978 and who grew up in this church, made the combination of social justice and spirituality a big part of his goals for the Presbyterian church as moderator. In 1991, he wrote a book entitled Reformed Spirituality and later a companion volume of prayers. Both Pastor Laurie and I knew him as a professor of spirituality at San Francisco Theological Seminary, San Anselmo, CA.

Let us continue to be known for our advocacy for inclusion and social justice, but let us also seek to grow spiritually throughout our lives. There are many stages of growth in our understanding of faith. As long as we live, we are never through with growth. May we be blessed on this journey of hospitality, spiritual growth, and justice and peace for all.