

Hospitality is a State of Being

Pentecost 8 – Year C – July 22, 2007

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

I don't know about you, but I've always had the mental image of Martha looking something like Lucy Ricardo, in the kitchen, banging the pots and pans louder and louder, until she finally comes out into the living room. Drying her hands on her apron, flour in her hair, stirring something in a pot. She's finally had enough.

We are challenged this morning in the scriptures with stories about two couples. Abraham and Sarah, who begin by entertaining three strangers who appear at their tent. Mary and Martha, who welcome their friend Jesus into their home. Abraham and Sarah, who discover that it is not strangers whom they are entertaining, but that God has entered into their lives that dusty afternoon. Mary and Martha, who also, as it turns out, have welcomed God into their home. Hospitality, when offered

with a genuine and open heart, can result in an encounter with the divine that can change our lives forever.

We are given a sly peek at what might have been the relationship between Abraham and Sarah, in the story from Genesis. This couple who are portrayed as the archetypal father and mother of both the Jewish and Christians faiths must have been quite a pair. For those who care to calculate such things, Abraham at this point is taken to be about ninety-nine years old, and Sarah, while perhaps a little bit younger, is nonetheless a woman of some age.

I can imagine that Sarah laughed several times that day. She might have laughed first when she observed her old husband Abraham running all over the place trying to impress the three strangers who stopped by their tent. First he ran out to meet them, then Abraham hastened to the tent, and told Sarah to hurry up and bake some bread. Next he ran to the herd to get a calf, and told one of his slaves to hurry up and get the bar-b-que fired up.

Sarah probably also laughed when Abraham began to tell her how to bake the bread. "Make ready quickly three measures of

choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." If my Dad had brought home three guests for dinner at the last minute, and then told my Mom not only which recipe to use – but how to do the cooking – he would have left the kitchen trying to avoid the cast iron skillet that was aiming for his head!

And of course we know that Sarah certainly did laugh when she heard one of the strangers tell Abraham that she would give birth to a son. It was perhaps a nervous laugh. Just who were these strangers? And how did they know Sarah's name? And how did these strangers, out of all the topics for polite table-talk chatter, happen upon the one area of their lives where Abraham and Sarah had been unsuccessful.

Four times over the course of their married life, Abraham had come home with wild tales. Of supposed conversations with God, where they were promised not only a son, but descendants who were too vast to number. Like Sarah and Abraham themselves, the story had perhaps gotten a little old. And now here was this stranger, bringing up that sad old tale, completely out of the blue.

It is at this point in the narrative that the conversation shifts from a generic and neutral third-person-plural, and becomes the single voice of God. Now it's not only Abraham who is having conversations with God. Sarah is brought personally into the

picture, and given the same incredible and very hard-to-believe-news that she will have a child. *Is nothing to wonderful for God?* is the challenge given to Sarah's heart and soul.

What began as a simple exercise in Middle-Eastern hospitality has become something entirely different. Hospitality itself has shifted. It's not as simple as hospitality being about kneading flour, grilling a steak, and making a dessert. The roles of host and guest have flipped. When we acknowledge that God is the host, hospitality becomes not a list of things that we do. It is rather a state of being. It is a state of being – offered to us by God – that breaks our hearts, and our minds, and our souls, wide-open. Wide open to both opportunities and challenges far beyond anything that we could possibly ask or imagine.

In the same way that Abraham and Sarah's story isn't about roadside manners, Martha and Mary aren't simply examples of how two sisters with different temperaments either get along – or don't – when they live under the same roof.

It's a little too quick and easy to say that Martha is the over-functioning, resentful busybody, and that Mary is the thoughtful, and perhaps even shy and retiring adoring fan of Jesus.

We can first think about just what it is that Martha is so busy about – her many tasks.

It's intriguing that we all likely jump to the conclusion that Martha is busy fixing supper. I don't know about you, but I've always had the mental image of Martha looking something like Lucy Ricardo, in the kitchen, banging the pots and pans louder and louder, until she finally comes out into the living room. Drying her hands on her apron, flour in her hair, stirring something in a pot. She's finally had enough.

"Hey Jesus! If you want to get anything to eat today why don't you tell that lazy do-nothing sister of mine to get off her you-know-what and get in here and help out a little! I'm all alone in here!!"

Maybe that says something more about my home life as a child than it does about Luke's story, but that is the perfectly clear image that I've always had of this event.

Martha is busy with many tasks. Luke doesn't tell us what kind of tasks. We don't know if these are immediate, household, in the kitchen and garden tasks. The word that Luke uses to describe Martha's activity is *diakinos*. Deacon. When you examine where else that word is used throughout the Gospels and the rest of the Christian scriptures, you don't find very many instances where it involves baking bread or fixing supper.

The four evangelists and the authors of the rest of what we call the New Testament

actually do use this word a great deal. It almost always is used in the context of serving God and of the work of God's kingdom. Martha and her many tasks. Is she complaining about no help in the kitchen?

Just as God challenged Sarah with the question *Is nothing to wonderful for God?* Jesus challenges Martha: *don't get so worried and distracted.*

What began as a simple visit and dinner party for their favorite rabbi has become something entirely different for the two sisters in today's Gospel. Hospitality itself has shifted. It's not as simple as hospitality being about kneading flour, grilling a steak, and making a dessert. The roles of host and guest have flipped.

Jesus picks up the challenge that Martha presents. One school of thought known as "family systems theory" would tell us that Jesus should have stayed out of this sibling quarrel. This is a classic case of triangulation. Martha has an issue with Mary. Martha doesn't speak with Mary, she goes to Jesus. Jesus should say: *Martha – sounds like you have a problem with your sister. How does that make you feel? Why don't you to set down and talk this through. I'll just step outside with the guys while you two hash this out. By the way – let me know when supper is ready. I've been teaching all day long – and I'm starving!* As much as I like family systems theory and it's best known guru Rabbi

Edwin Freedman, it appears that neither Luke nor Jesus had read any of Freedman's books.

Jesus of course does not see a triangle to avoid. He sees two people whom he loves. He sees Mary, who isn't at all representing the shy, reserved, adoring fan. She is actually quite boldly doing what no woman should have ever done. She's sitting at the feet of the rabbi, listening to him teach – something that only a man should be doing.

Jesus also sees Martha. It doesn't really matter exactly what tasks she was about. She might have been fixing supper. She might have been organizing the care of widows and orphans. She might have been trying to recruit Sunday School teachers, or choir members, or counselors for Summer Camp. It wasn't a matter of the tasks. It was that she was worried and distracted.

It is so easy – and I'm speaking in the first person here – I invite each of you to listen in your own interior first person voice – it is so easy to get worried and distracted. We can have the most wonderful, self-giving, altruistic, charitable list of tasks in the world. We can function best when in a team, or maybe sometimes it really is better if we just do it by ourselves. Whatever the task – and however large or small the team – getting distracted and worried puts us at risk of losing sight of the One who created us.

We were created out of the overwhelming love of God for creation. Our best response to that love, is to extend our best reflection, of that love, in acts of genuine hospitality. When we acknowledge that God is the ultimate host, hospitality becomes not a list of things that we do. It is rather a state of being.

Let us pray: Holy and life-giving God, Help us to always remember that you are the host, and we are your guests. The table is yours. Help us to be more like Sarah, and have hearts and souls that are so open that we can laugh with you, when you present us with challenges and opportunities that turn our lives upside down. Help us to be more like those two incredible sisters. May we, like Martha be unafraid to pick up those challenges and opportunities. May we, like Mary stay mindful that remaining rooted, grounded, nourished and in love with you, is the better part.