

Homily Pentecost 9C
July 17, 2016
Grace, River Forest

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

Focused on Hospitality

In Jesus' name. Amen

Both the first reading today from Genesis and the Gospel from Luke are about people focused on hospitality.

The Genesis story is almost humorous in its account of Abraham rushing about to be hospitable to the three men he suddenly sees standing near his tent “by the oaks of Mamre...in the heat of the day.” Abraham somehow recognizes that it is the Lord who has come to him in these three visitors, so he “runs” to meet them at the entrance to his tent. What he offers them is “a little” hospitality – “a little water” so they can wash their feet, and “a little bread,” for refreshment. But the hospitality he has in mind is anything but “little.” He “hastens” to ask Sarah to “quickly” take “three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Then Abraham runs “to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who ‘hastened’ to prepare it.” Finally, he takes “curds and milk and the calf he had prepared, and set it before” the three visitors. This is no meal of leftovers heated up in the microwave, no “light refreshments” gathered together from what Abraham and Sarah had on hand in their refrigerator. For all

of Abraham's hurrying and scurrying about, this is a meal that would take a modern farm family most of the day to put together, what with butchering a calf and putting a roast into the oven. This was more than a little hospitality that Abraham and Sarah provided to their visitors; it was a full feast, with all the stops pulled out, and God was most assuredly pleased with it. For one of the visitors at the end says, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

So...think about all the trouble Abraham and Sarah went to, to provide hospitality to their guests. What's the problem then with the scene in the Gospel? We're told by Luke that Jesus and his disciples were on their way again, journeying toward Jerusalem. And that, when "he entered a certain village,...a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home." In John's Gospel that "certain village" is identified as Bethany, and we learn that this family is made up of not only Mary and Martha, but also their brother Lazarus. In Luke's account today, Lazarus is not mentioned at all. He is either absent from the scene, or a silent participant in the drama that plays out. Focused on hospitality to Jesus and his disciples, Martha undoubtedly headed for the kitchen to put some food on the table for these weary travelers. Maybe she also had to pick up the house some, as we sometimes have to do when company stops by unannounced. What else she

had to do, we could only guess – put out bowls of water for her guests to wash their feet and refresh themselves, send out for additional provisions, set the table. And while Martha was going to and fro, beside herself, trying to be hospitable to her guests, there was her sister, Mary, sitting there at the Lord's feet, listening to every word Jesus was saying. Finally, Martha – distracted as she was by the many things she still had to do – could take it no longer. But instead of going to Mary, she goes to Jesus to complain: "Lord, don't you care that I've been left by Mary to do all the work? Tell her to help me!"

And what is Jesus' response to this domestic squabble? Does he say, "Yes, Mary. Remember how Abraham's whole household pulled together to provide hospitality for his guests? You should be out in the kitchen helping Martha get things ready, not listening in on me, teaching my disciples." No. Quite the opposite. He commends Mary for choosing "the one thing needful," the "better part." And what is that part? It is being Jesus' disciple – because sitting at someone's feet and listening to that person was the posture of discipleship, in Jesus' time. Jesus is calling Mary his disciple, commending her for being his follower. This commendation is extraordinary. For in Jesus' day, it was forbidden, against the law, to teach the Torah, to women. But there is no such stricture for Jesus. Women were every bit as much called to be his disciples as men.

And what is it that Jesus is saying to Martha? Is he chastising her for doing the meal making and caretaking that women traditionally have done, and still do? Not at all. There is no scolding tone to his voice when he speaks her name, “Martha, Martha.” And he doesn’t criticize her for being hospitable, for serving, but for losing her focus, being “worried and distracted by many things,” instead of focusing on her guest, on who was there with her in her home. For isn’t it true that the best times we have spent as guests in other people’s homes have been determined not so much by the table settings and food, as by the memorable conversations we have had, the listening and laughing and sharing we have done, the deepening relationships that have formed, the ties that have been forged or strengthened? Hospitality, in its essence, is mainly about focusing on the guest.

So this is not really a story about a spat between two sisters. Not really a story that sets up a conflict between serving – going and doing likewise, or listening to Jesus and studying his word. We need to hear last week’s story of the Good Samaritan and this week’s story of Mary and Martha *together* – because both tell us a part, a slice, of how we are to be Christ’s disciples in the world today.

Someone has called “continuous partial attention...the disease of the Internet age.” (Linda Stone, as quoted in James Wallace, “Homiletical

Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, p. 267) One of the commentaries I read this week said, “Perhaps [that disease] has always been with us, and just the causes of our inattention, [our partial distraction], have altered.” (Wallace, *ibid.*) Like the latest craze, *Pokemon Go*.

I have been wondering what the relevance of today’s text is to the horrific tragedy in Nice this past week, or to those terrible shootings occurring all around us, it seems, week after week. The story of Mary and Martha is a story about hospitality in our homes, welcoming Jesus as our guest and listening to him. It occurs to me, however, that we have more homes, more households, than one. We have our church home, called Grace, and the whole household of faith – other brothers and sisters in Christ. And we call planet earth our “home.” How do we practice hospitality, welcome Jesus, listen to Jesus, in these homes, also?

One commentary I read suggested that there could well have been nearly 100 people traveling along with Jesus when he stopped at Martha’s house: the 12 disciples, the 70 others he sent out in pairs, the women mentioned in Luke 8, who followed Jesus. (Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, p. 189) The thing is that when Jesus comes into our “homes” as guest today, he never comes alone. He still brings other people with him.

Like our fellow members of the household of faith from Harmony. I love it that a Grace member, an architect, evaluated all the bids for the new roof at Harmony's house of worship, selected the best bid and is helping oversee the project. That's hospitality to our brothers and sisters in the household of faith. And so is what Grace youth and adults are doing in Slovakia these weeks.

Several years ago now Jesus brought with him to Grace a refugee family, looking for a new start. Grace sponsored and helped settle that family – whose children had spent their whole lives up to that point, 16 years, living in a refugee camp. Last week two of the Grace team members who welcomed that family into the U.S. attended the youngest son's wedding. The children all have jobs now, own their own homes, and are proud American citizens.

When we sit at Jesus' feet as Jesus' disciples, we also sit at the feet of those he brings with him: the sick and suffering, the leper, the stranger, the person of color, the captive, the poor, the least of these. I think it is ironic – and terribly sad – that in our country there are people on both sides of the political spectrum who feel as if their lives don't matter, that they have been disenfranchised by a system that is rigged against them. Jesus, when he comes to be our guest, brings them all with him and asks us to listen -- to their pain and heartache, their disillusionment and hopelessness, because so few others are really listening. Oh, others will use

folks' cynicism and anger to cause more division and advance their own agendas. But Jesus calls on us, his disciples – when hate sites and hate messages dominate the internet – to begin the hard work of reconciliation, as Jesus himself made peace, broke down the dividing wall between us, and reconciled the whole world to himself, while we were yet sinners, through his suffering and death on the cross. How can we – like Abraham, with urgency and great delight – offer extravagant hospitality to those guests Jesus brings with him to us today?

I don't have an answer. I wish I did. But I do know that this is what Jesus calls us to today, as we sit and listen once more at his feet:

“You are my witnesses,...to the ends of the earth.”

“Love one another, as I have loved you.”

“Fear not, for I am with you...to the end of the age.”

And, oh, yes: “Supper's ready! Come to the table.”

In Jesus' name. Amen.