

Anne S. Hall
 University Lutheran Church
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Genesis 18:1-10a
 Luke 10:38-42

THE PERFECT HOSTESS

When you have guests coming, what do you do to get ready? In our home, I am the primary organizer of hospitality. David is always ready to help, but unless it's a supper for his colleagues and I won't be there, I'm the one who thinks about the details. Most often, I'm the one who makes sure the house gets cleaned and that there are fresh towels in the bathroom and fresh sheets on the guest bed. I ensure that the menus are planned, the food bought, the meals prepared. I decide which tablecloth to use, and make sure that the dishes match. Most often I cook and serve, and David cleans up.

I do all this because hospitality is important to me. I want our guests to feel comfortable and welcome in our home. I want them to enjoy themselves and their surroundings, and to go on their way well-rested and well-fed.

Consequently, I identify with Martha in today's Gospel story. Like me, Martha is the one who gets the house and the meal ready when guests arrived. Mary, on the other hand, sits at Jesus' feet, apparently doing nothing to help. And when Martha complains, Jesus tells her that Mary has chosen the better part.

So, I have to wonder, what is Jesus' message here? In saying that Mary has chosen the better part, is he telling Martha that hospitality is unimportant? Is he saying that she shouldn't prepare for and serve her guests, including himself? Is her choice to be hospitable the wrong choice?

If we consider the rest of Jesus' ministry, it seems highly unlikely that he intends to condemn hospitality here. The Gospel of Luke is full of stories of hosts providing generously for their guests, often through a meal. It is at a dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee that Jesus praises the woman from the city who bathes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Jesus himself hosts a meal for 5000 people. His parables compare God's reign to a heavenly banquet table, and he institutes a ritual meal to commemorate his self-giving. As Rebecca Kruger Gaudino says in the *New Proclamation* commentary, "behind the scenes of most of these meals are, no doubt, women like Martha 'manning' the ovens and chopping boards."¹

Both testaments of the Bible emphasize God's call to provide gracious hospitality. A good example is today's first lesson, in which Sarah and Abraham prepare a feast for the three angels who come to visit them. Hebrews refers to this story when it enjoins us, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares."² No, Jesus is surely not condemning Martha for her hospitality.

The tradition of generously welcoming a guest remains a rule of life in cultures around the world, and is a great blessing for those who visit there. In Gaza, when David and I traveled there with a delegation in May, everywhere we went, after our host warmly welcomed us and invited us to be seated, the first thing he or she would ask was, "Would you like coffee, or tea?" Since we were visiting several places a day, for the first few days I accepted the first couple of offers, and then, politely--I

¹ Gaudino, Rebecca J. Kruger, *Newproclamation.com*, July 18, 2010, p. 4.

² Hebrews 13:2.

thought--turned down the rest. That was until I learned that there was nothing polite about turning down an offer of refreshments. A compassionate hostess saved me from terminal rudeness by explaining: "We are Arabs, and if you refuse our offer of hospitality, you insult us!" After that, I learned to drink however many cups of coffee were offered, and deal with the consequences.

Those of you going to Tanzania will have similar experiences. You will look around at the poverty of the people you visit and think, "I have so much and they have so little—I should be giving to them, not allowing them to give to me." Nonetheless, you will be served chicken and beef while the students eat rice and beans; you will be showered with gifts; a goat will be roasted in your honor; and you will accept because to do anything else would be an insult to your hosts. In 2006, we worried about what Ailanga was spending to feed us on days we were at the school, and even wondered if we should come back, given how expensive we were for them. "Don't worry about it," our hosts told us, "that is what we do—it is our tradition to welcome our guests in this way. This is how we show that we are glad you are with us. Please, please, come back!"

For millennia, the tradition of hospitality has been central to the cultures of the world. Even when it has not been essential to survival, it has been essential to a gracious life worth living.

Let us go back to the story of Mary and Martha, then. If Jesus is not teaching that Martha was wrong to give herself to the service of hospitality, what *is* he saying in this story? It seems clear that in his admonition to Martha, Jesus wants to expand her understanding of hospitality to encompass its object, which is the interaction between host and guest.

As Luke describes Martha, he tells us that she was "distracted by her many tasks." The Greek word for "distracted" means "pulled or dragged away." Jesus tells her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and pulled away by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

What is the "better part" that Mary has chosen? She has chosen to join with the other disciples, sitting with Jesus and absorbing his teachings about the reign of God and the call to discipleship. While Martha has been rightfully engaged in the service of hospitality, it is now time for her to take a break from those duties and interact with her visitor. It is time for her to allow this divine guest to become her host, as he brings the good news of the gospel to her. This "better part" is available for her to choose, just as it is available to Mary, and to each of us.

As with the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who at the end of the story waits outside while the welcome feast for his brother goes on inside, we don't know what Martha will choose. Will she join the meal she has worked so hard to prepare? Will she sit down with her guests and receive the gifts that they bring into her life? Will she find a time, before or after the meal, to sit down at Jesus' feet with Mary and learn from him? Or will she spend the rest of his visit in the kitchen, resentful that her sister is not helping?

Luke's open-ended story invites us in. The question becomes, not what will Martha do, but what will we do?

There is nothing wrong with being hospitable. Hospitality is a great blessing that enriches all of us. But welcoming a visitor is more than providing a comfortable environment and a nutritious meal. It is also about opening our heart to the guest, about

opening our selves to learn from the insights that our guest might bring, and about sharing the truths we have found that might enrich the life of our visitor.

Sarah and Abraham entertained angels unawares, and received the great blessing of a long-awaited child. Jesus stands ready to be our guest. He waits to bring us the amazing, saving news that God's reign is here, among us, and to show us the way to live into that reign. Let us not allow distractions to pull us away from this most precious visitor. Let us welcome and serve him, sit with him and walk with him, all our lives long. May it be so. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE
July 18, 2010

Called, gathered, and empowered to serve, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. After each petition you may respond, "Hear our prayer." Let us begin with silence.

[a brief silence]

We pray for Philip, Catherine and Carol, and for all the delegates who leave tomorrow for Tanzania. Protect them as they travel; give them eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to love all those whom they encounter. May they make many friends and come back with much to teach us about our sisters and brothers at Ailanga. Bless them as they carry out this mission of linking two parts of the body of Christ, that we may all be one, just as Jesus prayed that we would be. God, in your mercy...

We pray for the nations of the world, that your justice and peace may be realized on earth. May these our ambassadors increase our understanding of the realities of life in Africa, and because of them may we work for a more just distribution of the resources with which you have graced our planet. God, in your mercy...

We pray for all of creation, that the walls and barriers that divide our lands may be removed, and your people and animals be freed to share your earth with peace and respect for one another. May these travelers return with pictures and stories that will motivate us to work for a shared and restored creation. God, in your mercy...

We pray for all those who feel forgotten in their suffering or who need your special care. May these representatives respond with compassion to those who are suffering in Africa, even as we act with compassion toward those who are ill and in need here among us. God, in your mercy...

We pray for our congregation. Focus our hearts on your will, that we might be ready both to serve you and to receive your blessings, like Martha and Mary. May we be ever ready to welcome you into our hearts, and to follow where you lead. God, in your mercy...

P: Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.