

Sermon on Luke 10:38-42, Genesis 18:1-10a
6th Sunday after Pentecost, July 21, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

What would you do if you received word that “the Lord is coming to your house today?” Would you jump out of a tree like Zaccheus, scurry around the house, cleaning and giving directions to your family to get things ready – like Abraham did in the first lesson? Would you get busy yourself, cleaning and chopping vegetables, cooking dinner, and preparing the table where your guest of honor would sit? Would you sit down at the feet of Jesus, engage in conversation and listen intently to every word he said, oblivious to the fact that he was “coming for dinner, not for a one-on-one conversation or seminar on discipleship? Which response would best describe you? We see all these responses in Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Martha in today’s scripture. What would YOU do?

I know what it is like in our house, when guests come to visit. If we have invited them for dinner, there is usually a whole day spent in preparation: cleaning, sweeping, vacuuming, chopping, slicing, dicing, cooking and setting the table. When the guests do arrive, we offer refreshment, a place to sit, perhaps some conversation and small talk, and when dinner is finally ready, and invitation to be seated at the table. Most deep conversation doesn’t come until later in the meal or after dinner, if it comes at all. If there is a rare conversation that gets to a spiritual level, we are doubly blessed.

There are various cultural traditions that surround visiting people in their homes. As a pastor whose privilege is to be welcomed into many of your homes, hospital rooms or workplaces, I observe many ways in which people offer hospitality, from the elaborate to the very simple. Most people will offer you at least a glass of water when you enter their home, some a cup of coffee, or maybe a beer or ice tea on a hot day. When I have visited immigrants from Asia or Africa, there is an expectation that a good host will offer some kind of drink, and some fruit – it would be unthinkable not to! In Sweden or Denmark, you are offered “fika” – coffee and sweets or Danish, if you come at the right time! I remember in the “old days”, people would offer coffee and cake, or pie, or something substantial when the pastor came by to visit – I think it’s a generational thing. One afternoon years ago I visited Aaron and Dorothea Fentress, expecting maybe a glass of water or a cup of coffee, and Mrs. Fentress had prepared a whole fried chicken dinner, with all the fixins, at about 2:30 in the afternoon! I wasn’t prepared for that, but this was old school, African American home-cooking hospitality. I think they took their scripture seriously, to do your best for guests, because who knows, “you might be entertaining angels unawares!”

When Abraham and Sarah were surprised by the visit of the Lord, it was disguised in the form of three men whom they did not recognize. They just showed up at the door of their tent, in the 100 degree heat of the day (like this past Friday!). But as soon as Abraham saw the three visitors, he ran out to greet them, and sprang into action getting water to wash their feet, food and drink prepared to offer them cakes, a tender calf, curds and milk. One of the men told Abraham the good news: that Abraham's wife Sarah would bear a son, in their old age (he was 99 and she was "only" 90)! The news was so unexpected and inconceivable, that each of these two "senior citizens" *laughed out loud!* But God's joke was on them, because in due time, Sarah did have a son, whom they would name, Isaac (which means, "*laughter*" in Hebrew)! Isaac's birth would fulfill the promise of God in scripture, in which God would make of Abraham and Sarah a "great nation".

So on to the story of Mary and Martha, when Jesus visited them in their home. It was just after Jesus had told the story of the Good Samaritan, who had done so much to care for a man beaten and left for dead by thieves on the road to Jerusalem. A Levite and a priest were too distracted by their important tasks, and passed on by. But the Samaritan showed mercy to the man who was injured, so Jesus told his listeners, "*Go and do likewise.*" The message is clear: "get busy" and do good works of mercy, for the sake of all those who are suffering.

The next thing we know, Jesus has arrived in the village where Mary and Martha lived, and they welcomed Jesus into their home (just as the 70 disciples had experienced when they went out two by two – faithful people welcomed him and showed hospitality). But they showed it in different ways. Martha did what she did best, perhaps, busily preparing the house and the meal for their guest – Jesus of Nazareth, a holy man of God AND their friend! *She did what any of us would do!* Mary did the unexpected thing, perhaps, as a woman of her culture and time: *she sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him* Then Martha reacts – feeling exasperated, that she has been doing "all the work herself" – and she explodes, complaining to Jesus, that he should "tell her to help". Jesus attempts to calm her down, to help her see that the important thing today is to hear what he has to say. *Because Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he is about to confront the leaders in the Temple and those who collaborate with Rome in the oppression of the people, that God sees what is going on, God has compassion on the suffering people, and has sent Jesus to save them.* But not in the way that anyone would expect.

It's important to say that this is not about the "roles of women". The "fight" is not between Mary and Martha, or who was the best "example" for showing hospitality or following Jesus. They are not the "end all" examples for woman to be disciples today: either get busy in the kitchen or sit at the feet of Jesus in prayer and devotion. It's not that simple! You see it in the timing of the story – Jesus' message to Martha is about the *urgency* of his work. *For the Kingdom of God is*

near – it is at hand! So even though the meal being prepared is important, it's time to listen up! Set aside your duties and sit beside Jesus, while he is here in your house!

I had a professor in Seminary, the late Loren Halvorsen, who often spoke of the *balance of ministry as the journey inward and the journey outward*. It is like breathing in and breathing out – both are needed! It is critical for Christian growth for you and me to worship and pray, to read God's word and hear the gospel proclaimed, and to listen in silence to the voice of God. That is the "breathing in". Then it comes time for our witness to others, to speak prophetically about God's compassion for the world, to care for the sick, teach our children, prepare food for the hungry, and do the work of justice. That is the "breathing out". Both are essential for our lives of faith!

Let me give you an example. I spend a lot of time in the church, either preaching or leading worship here, doing administrative tasks in my office, attending meetings, and participating in public actions for justice. That's all important. That's my breathing out! But it doesn't happen unless I breathe in - as I also spend time early in the week reading scripture with other pastors, listening to other people tell me their stories, watching what is going on around me in the world, observing, and listening quietly for the voice of God in all of this chaotic mess! Sometimes it happens when I am doing the cleaning, cutting the grass or digging in the garden, that I hear the voice of God – because I am not so distracted by the multi-tasking of my daily life. It might come as I gaze across the lake on an evening walk, or even in the middle of the night in a dream.

Breathing in makes every outward breath possible. Prayer in silence makes possible the words of faith that we speak. Listening to others helps give us something to say which includes others with empathy, without selfishness. Hearing the prelude to a hymn prepares us to sing boldly our song of faith – all in the same key! Worship and prayer in the church is crucial, as we do this together! For without this church, you and I don't have a place to gather together in faith, to sit at the feet of our Lord as one body, and with each during these critical days.

So the main point of today's lessons is the critical importance of showing hospitality, whether it is for a stranger arriving for an unannounced visit, a relative or important person in your life or community, a visitor showing up at the door of the church in the middle of the week, or if it is the Lord Jesus himself coming for dinner! Showing hospitality to a guest is not only cultural or "good manners", it is a crucial part of our expression of faith. For just as God is gracious to us and welcomes you and me to God's house, so we must welcome others. Jesus himself is present as our host at the Lord's table today where we offer the Eucharistic feast of Christ's body and blood to the world, in the bread and wine given to everyone in

Jesus' name, which is our ultimate hospitality! All are welcome at this table of our Lord, where we receive God's mercy, forgiveness of sins, life and salvation!

This table is not only placed in church sanctuaries for Christians to enjoy alone and ever-dwindling numbers. The table of our Lord's welcome, the compassion of God's Word made flesh, extends out these doors into the world *through us, you and me!* That's our task; the work of the Church. Not only to prepare the table of our Lord's altar for communion – though that is crucially important. Not only to sit in our pews or kneel in prayer, reflecting on God's Word to us in the gospel, though that is even more important! But for you and me to go out these doors in Jesus' name to bring the Lord's compassion, mercy and love for every human being, man, woman or child to every place on earth. To our homes and to the streets, where people sleep under bridges, to county jail cells and detention camps on the border, to refugee camps and wherever human beings seek refuge, shelter and comfort. To have the courage to say “you are welcome here”, not “send her back”. For it is the Lord's hospitality lived out through us today that makes God's kingdom come on earth, for all God's children, for the immigrant, the asylum seeker and the refugee as well as the citizen and the familiar face in your house. Thanks be to God! Amen.