

2025 Proper 11C

For many years I offered congregations a workshop on the topic of “hospitality” within the church. The first story you heard this morning, about Abraham welcoming these three travelers to his encampment, was one of my favorite Bible stories to share. It reflects the culture of the Ancient Near East, where you offered shelter and food to any traveler going by because stopping places were few and far between. Hospitality was a primary virtue because it could be a matter of life and death. To refuse to share your food and water or provide safety within your own boundaries was a grave sin; some even equated it to murder. It is a value that continues even today—at least in some parts of the world.

Abraham is not being excessively, extravagantly generous. He was doing what was expected.

Likewise, there were expectations placed on visitors. If you were welcomed into an encampment, you were not to take advantage of your hosts. You were not to steal from them or murder them. You were to accept what was offered, not overstay your welcome, and pronounce a blessing upon your hosts before you left.

Abraham prepared food (or more likely, had his household prepare it), provided water for them to wash and refresh themselves, and served them a meal that would sustain them further along their journey. In response, they pronounced a blessing upon him and his

wife Sarah. “I will return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

We know from all the chapters of Genesis leading up to this one, that Abraham wanted a son more than anything. We also know that God had repeatedly promised him one. After Sarah grew old and it was no longer physically possible for her to bear a child, they tried to manipulate the story. Abraham “went in” to Sarah’s female slave, Hagar, and fathered a son, Ishmael. But that is not the son God had in mind.

It annoys me a little that the lectionary ended that first reading where it did, because it left out the best part of the story. Sarah overhears this declaration of future progeny, and laughs. I don’t think it’s light-hearted, joyful laugh. She knows it’s absurd to think that she, in her advanced years, would bear a child. I think it was a laugh of derision.

The visitors hear her laugh and confront her about it—and she denies laughing. She is embarrassed to be caught expressing her doubts about God’s faithfulness. But they persist in telling the truth. Yes, you laughed. You don’t believe that there is any hope here. But “is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

And indeed, Sarah gets pregnant, she delivers a baby boy, and they name him Isaac. A name which means Laughter. A different kind of laughter than what happened by that tent flap that day when the strangers came.

Hospitality brings blessing, both to the one welcomed but also to the one welcoming.

This is a lesson echoed in this morning's Gospel reading, as well.

Martha and Mary welcome Jesus into their home. This is a little odd. There is no mention of a brother named Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke. It's these two women, keeping house alone. I don't want to get sidetracked by the oddity of an apparently thriving household with no male relative on site, but it's unusual.

Even more unusual is that one of these sisters, Martha, invites a strange man into her home. She is probably the older sibling, the one "in charge." We certainly get that sense in what occurs next in the narrative.

Martha gets annoyed with Mary, because Mary is not fulfilling her proper role. Frankly, she's not acting like a "proper" woman. She is sitting at Jesus' feet, but instead of washing them, she's just listening. Like a disciple. Like a *man*.

Please hear me—I'm not male bashing here. I'm just saying that Martha hasn't fully understood the gift, the blessing, that Jesus is bringing to their home. Jesus is allowing Mary to be *Mary*. He wants Martha to do the same—to let Mary be Mary.

I think it's a misreading of this text to think that Jesus wants Martha to be like Mary. All that does is flip the dynamic, saying that one sister is better than the other. Jesus isn't choosing one sister over the other. It's not

either Martha or Mary, it's not active or contemplative. It's about finding the balance and learning to be present in the moment.

Jesus isn't criticizing Martha's activity, he's challenging her *distractedness*. She isn't appreciating his presence in the house and is instead trying to draw him into a fight with her sister. She's trying to get Jesus to take sides. That's always a dangerous enterprise—Jesus might not take the side we want him to take.

It's important that we listen to this story in light of the Parable of the Good Samaritan we heard last week. Remember that in that story, the young man asked Jesus to set a limit, to take a side. And Jesus surprised—and shocked—them all by telling a story in which he forced the listeners to see their enemy as the good guy. If you're going to try to force Jesus to take sides, he's probably not going to take yours.

And he's not going to take yours not because he is opposed to you, but because he wants you to see how it feels to be on the outside. Then, maybe, you'll be less interested in trying to break the world into "us" and "them." This doesn't mean that we turn a blind eye to evil when we see it. Sometimes we have to confront those whose actions are causing harm to others. But we can do that in a spirit of Christ-like love rather than self-righteous shaming. I have yet to see shame successfully change a single person. All it does is create deeper chasms between us.

The point is all the energy we put into taking sides is a distraction, keeping us from becoming the people God wants us to become. That word “distracted” in Greek means “pulled from many directions.” The word “worried” carries with it a sense of be anxious about not being enough. Perhaps Jesus was seeing something about Martha in that moment that Martha didn’t want to acknowledge about herself. Maybe it wasn’t that Martha thought she was better than Mary; maybe it’s that Martha worried she wasn’t as good as Mary. Maybe she thought that Jesus was making space for Mary but wouldn’t do the same for her. Maybe Martha’s problem with loving her neighbor—or her sister—as herself was that she didn’t really love herself all that much.

Maybe Jesus’ response is not so much a judgment as it is an invitation. “There’s room here at my feet for you, too, Martha. Come, sit. Be in community with your sister, instead of conflict. Receive the blessing I bring with me instead of thinking you have to provide it all.”

Where are the worried, distracted places in your life? I pray that you stop long enough to realize that you don’t have to impress Jesus. Jesus loves you just as you are. You are enough. You, too, can sit at Jesus’ feet, learn from him.

That’s the thing about true hospitality—it’s multi-directional. In making space for others we discover there is space for ourselves. New life may arise in the barren places, the places we had abandoned as hopeless. And in response we may find ourselves laughing together in

ways we couldn't have imagined possible. In offering love to our neighbor we learn that we are loved as well.

Maybe that's what this world needs right now—enough hospitality to love ourselves the way Jesus already loves us and then the grace and courage to love everyone else, whoever they are, without fear. If we worry less about getting Jesus to take *our* side and instead try to stay focused on staying by *his* side, we will eventually discover that, on the other side of the cross, there don't need to be any sides at all.

Amen.