

***Two Kinds of Hospitality***  
Luke 10:38-42, Genesis 18:1-10a

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On Block Island, hospitality is the biggest industry. In the Near East, hospitality is the biggest virtue. In the Biblical world, hospitality was a moral code that said that you were under obligation to receive guests, even if they were strangers, and to feed them and protect them. Genesis 18 tells the story of how Abraham and Sarah received three strangers who appeared outside their tent in the desert. They scrambled to get bread and water for them, then ran to the herd and slaughtered a calf, tender and good, and cooked dinner for their guests. The reward that Abraham and Sarah receive is the news that they are going to have a baby, something they have been hoping for for decades. It turns out that the three strangers are angels, but then we are told that it was Yahweh himself who appeared to them by the oaks of Mamre. Extending hospitality turns out to be welcoming God to your house—something Jesus said much later when he said “Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

In our culture we value privacy more than hospitality, so we can hardly imagine how deeply ingrained it was for Abraham and Sarah—or for Mary and Martha. The gospel of Luke has examples of hospitality running through it. Mary the mother of Jesus is welcomed to live with her relative Elizabeth. When Jesus begins his ministry, one of the first places he goes is to Simon’s house; his mother in law is suffering from a fever, but as soon as Jesus heals her she gets up and starts serving him. When Jesus calls Levi the tax collector to be a disciple, he holds a great banquet for Jesus and invited all his sinner friends. What differentiates Jesus from John the Baptist is that John fasts but Jesus parties. Jesus is at a party with Pharisees, and he makes a point of extending hospitality to a sinful woman who washes his feet and dries them with her hair—showing a kind of hospitality the Pharisees failed to. You could even say that Jesus feeding 5000 people who came to hear him preach was an act of hospitality. The Good Samaritan extends hospitality to a person of an enemy ethnic group. Jesus tells his hosts at a dinner not to invite people who will invite you back, but to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. He then compares the kingdom of God to a great banquet to which the outcasts are invited. In another parable, the prodigal son is welcomed home in a demonstration of hospitality in which his brother refuses to participate. When Jesus wants to bring salvation to the tax collector Zachaeus, he invites himself to Zachaeus’ home and becomes his guest. And of course on the night that he was betrayed Jesus himself invites his disciples to a dinner where he serves them himself. Enough?

In the middle of Luke’s gospel we have this story of Mary and Martha, two sisters who are extending hospitality in their own ways. It is a big deal to have the rabbi visit your home. It was like the old days when the preacher went home after church with a different family each Sunday; it was not only expected, it was an inspection. But in Jesus’ time it wasn’t a contest to see who could put on the fanciest spread. It was a high moral obligation to take the visiting teacher in and show him respect by how you treated him.

Sometimes we have heard the story of Mary and Martha as a contest between spirituality and hospitality. Mary is the one who sits at Jesus’ feet learning from him, while Martha is the one who is only concerned with getting dinner ready. I want you to think about the possibility that the two women are showing two different kinds of hospitality.

Most women in the church identify with Martha. Especially on the week before the church fair, I imagine most of you are thinking of yourselves as worker bees. Where would we be without the Marthas in the church? (And I don't just mean Martha Ball.) Do you think Jesus really meant that hospitality shown to him is unimportant, or that he thought that getting dinner ready was of no consequence? We're not given the end of the story, but I'm pretty sure that one way or another Jesus got his dinner. I doubt anyone's going to boycott coffee hour and sit at my feet following this service. We need people to get the food out, to clean house, to set the table.

But there is a kind of host or hostess who is too busy for the guests. My mother sometimes fell into that pattern. It's kind of a southern thing to overdo the food and keep pushing it on the guests and running back and forth to the kitchen. Old-style southern hostesses rarely sat down and ate with their guests—unless they were wealthy enough to have “help.” My mother never invited people over for dinner without preparing at least two meats, five vegetables, bread, and two or three desserts. Enough was never enough. It always had to be too much, or it would not have felt hospitable to her. You couldn't let any serving dish get empty, even at the end of the meal. The goal was to leave the guests feeling they hadn't made a dent in the bounty that was offered. But sometimes Becca and I had driven 900 miles with two kids to be there for that dinner, and what we really came for was to see Mom. That would have to wait, because the dinner came first, and she might be a blur, a streak moving between the table and the kitchen. I read about someone whose mother always set her own chair sideways at the dining table, so she could get up and run to the kitchen. One might wish that a hostess would pull up to the table and listen to you.

That's more or less the situation with Martha in our story. The problem with Martha is not that she is focused on providing hospitality for Jesus. Jesus has just given the example of the Samaritan who housed and fed the wounded man as a picture of what love means. This is the same Jesus who washed his disciples' feet and told them to be servants to one another. It's not wrong to get dinner ready. It's not wrong to be busy.

Martha's problem is not that she's working, but that she is worried and distracted. The word for “distracted” means that she is pulled in many directions, a bit like my mother. She is multitasking, but not giving attention to the one most important task. What is the most important task of hospitality? Paying attention to the guest.

Martha breaks the rules of hospitality by trying to embarrass her sister in front of company. She tries to get the guest to intervene in a family squabble on her side. She even says to Jesus, “Don't you care?” This is pretty tacky, and pretty much focused on “me” instead of the guest.

I'm not sure that Mary is without fault in this story. Maybe she wasn't pulling her weight with the preparations. But Jesus, the great teacher, has come into her house and permitted her to sit with the men in the posture of a student. We forget that these people lived in a society not so different from the Taliban culture; Mary was like Malala Yousafzai, the Afghan girl who is a pioneer in seeking to allow girls to sit at the feet of teachers. Mary was thrilled to have the chance to learn from the great teacher. Other things could wait. And I have to think that Jesus agrees with her about that.

But Jesus is gentle in his rebuke of sister Martha. It's not “Martha, you idiot” but “Martha, Martha, you poor thing. You are so stressed out, so worked up and pulled in every direction. Honey, there's only one thing that is really important here, and I'm afraid it's your sister who has chosen it. Just sit down for a while. Maybe dinner can be kept simple tonight. But

sweet Martha, I didn't come here to get your food. I came here to see you. Let me look at you. And take a minute to humor me by listening to what I have to say."

Jesus could have ended the story with a question, as he did the parable earlier in the chapter: "Now which of these sisters showed hospitality to the teacher?" But I wonder if the answer wouldn't have been "Both." One showed the hospitality of service and meeting the need for food and drink; the other showed hospitality by listening and focusing on what Jesus said. *The Christian Century* this week included a painting of Christ with Mary and Martha, done in Florence in 1603 by Alessandro Allori. He chose not to show the sisters in conflict but in harmony. Mary is holding a tray with glasses and a decanter, offering it to Jesus. Martha is on her knees and leaning on a book, probably a Bible. Nothing about the scene is historical; there were no books like that in Jesus' day, or glassware like that, and the dresses are 1603 dresses. The people look Florentine. This is about contemporary spirituality, not history. It says that the active Christian and the contemplative Christian are sisters. Ambrose of Milan had written more than a thousand years before, "Virtue does not have a single form. In the example of Martha and Mary, there is added the busy devotion of the one and the pious attention of the other to the Word of God."

So I say to you Marthas that you are not left out by virtue of your temperament. But at the same time, Jesus points us to the one thing needful. Don't be distracted by all the tasks you have. Distracted from what? Distracted from Jesus himself. What we have in Allori's painting is a picture of balance between the knowing Jesus and serving Jesus. But the one thing needful is to know him. Paul once said "All I want is to know him," (Phil. 3:10) and he said it as if it was a goal toward which his whole life was stretching. Paul also said, "This one thing I do." How many of us can say that? How many are doing one thing with our lives?

Do you remember the movie *City Slickers* with Billy Crystal? These suburban guys in midlife crisis head out to a dude ranch where they go camping with tough old Curly, played by the grizzled Jack Palance. Around a campfire, Curly says that these guys don't get it and asks them if they know what the secret of life is. "What?" they ask. "One thing," he says. "Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don't mean nothin'." In other words: You are worried and distracted by many things. Just one thing.

The longshoreman philosopher Eric Hoffer said this clearly:

*The feeling of being hurried is not usually the result of living a full life and having no time. It is on the contrary born of a vague fear that we are wasting our life. When we do not do the one thing that we ought to do, we have no time for anything else—we are the busiest people in the world.*

Today Jesus has come to your house. What are you going to do? This week most of us will be tempted to be the busiest people in the world. There is so much that needs to be done. We will be pulled in so many directions. But Jesus is saying to us, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted about many things. There is just one thing you really need. Come sit with me, child." Can we stop ourselves from doing what needs to be done for him—and do the one thing we really need? Let's slow ourselves down and give it a try.