

## Hospitality

Luke 10:38-42

When Jesus decided to drop in on Martha and her sister Mary, Martha's first impulse was to get something going in the kitchen. In doing this, she was being faithful to the tradition of hospitality begun long ago when Father Abraham welcomed three guests to his tent (Gen. 18:1-10). Just as Abraham turned to Sarah to assist with the duties of hospitality, Martha expected Mary to do the same. Martha's expectations did not include Mary's plopping down on the rug at Jesus' feet and leaving all the work for her.

That, however, is exactly what her sister did. Mary was in no hurry to come into the kitchen. While Martha was flipping through the cookbooks, boiling the water, chopping up the vegetables, and setting the table for sixteen rather than the three that she had originally expected, Mary settled down at the feet of their friend and guest, attentive to what he was saying. In fact, by sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary had taken the posture of a disciple. Mary listened with excitement as Jesus told about sending the 72 disciples out to the cities and villages to tell the people that he was coming to tell them that the Kingdom of God was near. He told of how they had been given power to preach and to heal. He told how he had told them not to take extra money or clothes, but stay where they were invited and eat what was put before them. He explained that as the disciples went to preach, some gathered to hear what the disciples had to say while others busied themselves with table service. Jesus explained it is in most households, including the household of faith; some are destined to live out their discipleship in the details of the common life (preparing meals, counting money, caring for the homebound, organizing outreach to the poor); while others are disciples in service to the word (study and prayer,

worship and preaching, evangelism and teaching). But Martha heard none of this. So, who could blame Martha for banging a few pots and putting the plates on the table with a sturdy thump?

Perhaps Jesus heard the bustling around back there and, after a while, even the muttering. Martha was not one who kept her feelings under a tight lid. Since Jesus was pretty sharp at gauging what was going on in people's hearts, he knew what the muttering was all about, long before Martha's frustration exploded into words, but he waited until Martha spoke. "Lord," Martha began, "don't you care ..."—showing that Mary wasn't the only one under scrutiny—"don't *you* care," she repeated, and then the gaze fell on sister Mary, "that my sister has left me *by myself* to do the serving?"

As a matter of fact, Jesus did not care. I like to think he smiled when he said, "Martha, dear friend, you are worried and distracted by many things." He did not go after Busy Martha, but Worried and Distracted Martha. He was speaking to his dear friend Martha, who worked herself into a state of anxious distraction over the meal she wanted to have for him. She focused her frustration not only on her sister but also on her friend and guest, and lost sight of the one she significantly called "Lord." Jesus gently called her to refocus. Hospitality is not primarily about the food; more important is the focus.

For years this story was interpreted to prioritize the contemplative life over the active life. However, this story can be read differently. It does not necessarily affirm the contemplative over the active life, and it should not be used to deny women or anyone their gifts and calls to ministry. Theologian John Shea observes that, while in English we hear that Mary has chosen "the better part," in Greek the word is translated as "good." Mary has chosen the "good" part, meaning she has chosen "the connection to God who is good, the ground and energy of effective action." He sees the story not as reinforcing a Martha-Mary dichotomy but calling

for a recognition that God is both inside and outside, sustaining us while summoning us to work and, through our service, to bring about a world of justice, mercy, and peace. It is not an either/or message but a both/and message.

A few years ago, Tom Friedman had a column on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* called "The Taxi Driver." He told of being driven by cab from Charles de Gaulle Airport to Paris. During the one-hour trip, he and the driver had done six things: the driver had driven the cab, talked on his cell phone, and watched a video (which was a little nerve-racking!), whereas he had been riding, working on a column on his laptop, and listening to his iPod. "There was only one thing we never did: talk to each other." Friedman went on to quote Linda Stone, a technologist, who had written that the disease of the Internet age is "continuous partial attention." Perhaps it is not only the disease of the Internet age; perhaps it has always been with us, and just the causes of our inattention have altered.

How are we to show hospitality when the kingdom of God comes near? If Joel Green is correct when he writes that "Jesus' encounter with Martha and Mary clarified the nature of the welcome he seeks not only for himself but also for his messengers—that is, for all who participate in the drawing near of God's dominion" —then a community that is hospitable to Christ is a community marked by the attention the community gives to God's word. A church that has been led to be "worried and distracted by many things" (v. 41) inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shallows of frantic potlucks, anxious stewardship campaigns, and events designed simply to perpetuate the institution. Decisions will be made in meetings without a hint of God's reign. Food and drink will appear at table without Christ being recognized in the breaking of bread. Social issues may be addressed, but the gospel is missed in acts that partake of politics as usual.

This often leads a congregation to get downright ornery. Night after night, members leave home to crank out the church business and return as clueless and

empty as they were when they walked out the door. Endless meetings breed resentment in otherwise pleasant Christians because the church's business is being done without any word of the God whom they thought they had agreed to serve. Martha comes to mind.

On the other hand, when we are led to position ourselves at Christ's feet—reading Scripture together and asking after its meaning, and wrestling like Jacob for God's blessing, studying and nurturing a faith that seeks understanding—then even the details of the common life begin to resound with good news. Luke reminds us that every elder or pastoral call is potentially an occasion to listen for God's word or to participate in the drawing near of God's dominion. Some of the more profound moments in ministry begin when we join a dinner party where an off-the-cuff question provides the opening for a conversation about life's meaning and purpose; or we enter a hospital room where another's physical vulnerability leads to a confession concerning a crisis of faith; or we arrive late to a meeting and manage to turn a mundane discussion toward the mystery of life together.

Still, there is this matter of the necessary work into which some are thrown when God's dominion draws near. Jesus knew people would be in the kitchen preparing food and drink for the seventy on a mission. In the church there is the need for people "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" ([Acts 6:3](#)) who will be given the task of waiting on tables. What, then, should the church make of Jesus' rebuke of Martha, for whom the devil apparently was in the details? "The nature of hospitality for which Jesus seeks," writes Green, "is realized in attending to one's guest, yet Martha's speech is centered on 'me' talk (3 times). Though she referred to Jesus as 'Lord' she was concerned to engage his assistance in her plans, not to learn from him." When anxiety in well-doing becomes the measure of our hospitality, then the church has forgotten the One whom it has been gathered to

serve. When Christ is proclaimed as instrumental to the church's program, then the community has ceased to attend to the Word that first called it into being.

Is it possible that this story of two sisters offers us an ongoing plea from the Lord to focus on him, to give him some "prime time," some continuous *full* attention, just as we do for our close friends? At least, this is what we do, if we want to keep them as close friends. This same Lord calls us to focus on him when we gather on Sunday, to move from our place of being "worried and distracted by many things" to one where we are in touch with the one thing needed, the good part that will not be taken away. There we will connect with the source that brings both peace and energy to all our undertakings. **James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R.**

You and I are in the service (*diakonia*) of Christ as, by his grace, we forget ourselves. Such acts of service, said Karl Barth, are "usually done in concealment, so that by their very nature no great glory can attach to them, and they can be undertaken and executed only as pure, selfless and unassuming service which might well be hampered or even totally spoiled by even occasional attempts at domination." Humility is the only conceivable posture when in word and sacrament the kingdom of God draws near. In this regard, only one comes to mind. No doubt when dinner was finally served that night at Martha and Mary's home, the guest was revealed, in the breaking of bread, to be their hospitable, humble, hidden host. **Cynthia A. Jarvis**

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