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Proper 11 C

This is the first time since I left parish ministry six years ago that I have wrestled with this gospel text as a preacher, and I was surprised this week at how much it vexed me. For years, I preached this text as an unambiguous endorsement of Mary's "better part", the life of contemplation and worship, and the importance of detaching ourselves from the anxiety and busy-ness that distracts us.

But this week, all I could think about was how Martha and Mary – and from them, all women – get forced into binary choices that make one a stereotype of perfection and the other, a scapegoat for all the problems of humanity. It made me think about how women get punished (and how often, as women, we punish each other) for making decisions about our lives. Bad girls vs. good girls, mommies who go out to work vs. mommies who stay home, breast vs. bottle, sleep training vs. the family bed – the list goes on and on. And men simply don't get forced into the same kind of boxes – they are allowed to live more complex, nuanced lives and are much less likely to be expected to explain or excuse the choice they've made.

So my first reaction when I read the text this week was resentment at the way Jesus sets Martha and Mary in opposition to each other – I was annoyed with Jesus for scolding Martha and rewarding Mary – as if women don't have enough problems without adding the Son of God's playing favorites to the list.

This passage from the Gospel of Luke comes early in a long travel narrative after Jesus has "set his face to go to Jerusalem", a narrative that will lead us, with Jesus, to the cross. And it comes directly after Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, which was proclaimed last week in our lectionary progression through Luke. So often, preachers pair these two texts together – the Good Samaritan is a call to active ministry and service to others, balanced by this story's affirmation of listening and contemplation.

But today – I want to break down that binary division that so often attends this text and instead, I want to examine hospitality, which is a deep, thematic stream through the Gospel of Luke and which really is a complex metaphor for our life together in the household of God.

I'm sure you've heard dozens of sermons through the years about how hospitality was a sacred trust in the ancient world. For a traveler wandering deep in the desert, whether or not hospitality was offered by another could mean the difference between life and death, between abundance and scarcity, between the security of an encampment and the vulnerability of being alone in the wilderness.

Abraham's encounter with the three strangers at the oaks of Mamre echoes this theme. Remember, Abraham himself is a wanderer – he and Sarah have put up a tent, but that shelter is more than his three guests have – and Abraham and Sarah welcome their heavenly visitors as they themselves will hope to be welcomed by others on their journey.

And that's the part that interests me – the way that hospitality is a complex social interaction that ebbs and flows as we change roles – now a host, now a guest – now giving, now receiving.

Jesus tells Martha that she is worried and distracted about many things – and it makes me wonder how long it's been since Martha had a chance to sit down. I wonder how much Jesus knows about what it takes to feed an unexpected crowd of guests. I'd love to hear a story where Jesus tells Simon and Peter to go chop some vegetables or do some dishes. I'd love to hear Jesus say, "Martha – come sit down for a minute and then we'll all pitch in and get this dinner ready." Keeping a home running smoothly is a complex enterprise and most of us who work full time and also bear primary responsibility for household management are pretty worried and distracted. Martha might be a better host if she also sometimes got a chance to be a guest.

It's ironic that Jesus rebukes Martha, because of course, he comes among us as one who serves. He's the one who wraps a towel around his waist and kneels before his disciples to wash their feet. He feeds, and nurtures and heals his way toward Jerusalem and tells us again and again that if we try to put ourselves first, we'll end up being last – that if we want to be great, we have to be servants.

But no one can be a servant in isolation – no one can be a host without a guest. And if Jesus shows us what it means to be a servant, he will also show us that he can be a guest, that he can receive service from others. Earlier in Luke, when Jesus went to the house of Simon the Pharisee, he allowed a woman to bathe his feet with her repentant tears. Simon objects, and Jesus delivers a stinging rebuke because Simon has so abjectly failed his own responsibilities as a host.

We can't be servants without someone to serve and we can't be guests without someone to serve us. And in the household of God, we ought to take turns and not allow ourselves to be pigeon-holed into one role or the other. Hosts need to be fed and cared for, and guests can't sit on their bottoms forever. Remember that Abraham and Sarah welcome their guests at Mamre because they hope they will be welcomed when they show up at a stranger's camp site in the future.

Hospitality is a deep thematic current in the river of our Judeo-Christian tradition, and there are expectations of both host and guest. In our lives of faith, in the church and in the world, we move between those two roles fluidly – we shouldn't always be pattering around doing and fussing, and we shouldn't always be sitting around waiting for someone else to serve us. We give and we receive, we work and we rest, we welcome and we are welcomed by others.

And always, always we are called to welcome the stranger. This is a cornerstone of our lives together in the household of God – we welcome the stranger, we clothe the naked, we feed the hungry and we visit those in prison. We do it, because – like Abraham and Sarah we recognize it as a sacred covenant – and we do it because we believe in welcoming, clothing, feeding and visiting others, we welcome, clothe, feed and visit Christ.

What's happening along our southern border is a tragedy and an abomination. History will judge the separation of families and the imprisonment of children as harshly as we now judge apartheid and the mass internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

In the meantime, Christians should at least be clear that the Gospel calls us to care for those who are most despised, most mistreated and above all, most vulnerable. That sacred trust of hospitality transcends any national boundaries or ethnic divisions. It has nothing to do with immigration policy, political parties or who we voted for and everything to do with the moral obligations we have as Jesus people.

Martha feels anxious, distracted and overwhelmed by the enormity of all her tasks – and it can feel that way to me when I contemplate this moral crisis – it feels too big, too complex, too incomprehensible to believe that any action I take could possibly make any difference.

But Martha has been a host for so long, she has forgotten that she is called also to be a guest – to be a guest first - for always, always - we receive first before we are asked to give.

We are all guests this morning – here to be filled with the holy food and drink of new and unending life in Christ. We are here to take into our own hearts, souls and bodies the One who died and rose for us, who tramples down death under his feet so that we can live in the power and promise of the resurrection. We are guests at his banquet table, and when we are fed, then we are sent out to do the work God has given us to do.

I will go home today and do something that eases the suffering of someone, somewhere in this catastrophe. I'm not going to worry if it's the best thing, or the most effective thing, I'm not going to wring my hands in despair and be anxious and overwhelmed like Martha because I've been a guest today. I've been fed and strengthened and equipped for this. As Jesus as shown me hospitality today, I'm going to go home and do something to care for a stranger.

Perhaps, like Sarah and Abraham, I will care for angels without even knowing whom I serve.

