

Proper XI: Year C: 20/21 July 2019  
 St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
 Patricia Kay Jue, Lay Preacher

## The Point of Hospitality

Genesis 18:1-10a  
 Psalm 15  
 Colossians 1:15-28  
 Luke 10:38-42

Welcome to St. James' Episcopal Church, in the Village of Clinton, in upstate New York. Welcome to this particular branch of the Jesus movement, for we, at St. James Clinton, pride ourselves in being a welcoming community. So I ask you: What makes you feel welcomed? How have you shown hospitality to others in this community of St. James, to folks in Clinton, and to the people of the greater Utica-Rome area?

In today's lectionary reading, we heard two familiar stories, that of Martha and Mary inviting Jesus into their home, and that of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three visitors. We get a glimpse of G-d's vision of what it means to extend hospitality to others.<sup>1</sup>

In the Gospel reading, Martha invites Jesus into the house. It is Martha, not Mary, the sister, who is the host. Martha invites, so Martha is the one who does all the things associated with being good host. I imagine Martha made certain there was a towel at the ready for Jesus – and his companions – when their feet are washed as they entered the house. Martha checks there is clean water for hand washing before food was served. I picture Martha giving Jesus something to drink as he crosses over the threshold – in the same way that even today, in that part of the world, one is greeted with a glass of sweet minted tea, or a small cup of strong coffee as a symbol of welcome, upon entering a home, a shop stall or even checking into a hotel. Martha is the one who goes outside to the cook fire to make certain the food is being prepared, and is the one who runs up to the flat roof to get the dried fruit. Martha is doing all the many good things to make certain Jesus is well cared for. She is being the **good host**. But all of these are no longer the “good” if the focus is on the towel, the water, the welcoming beverage, and the food preparation. They all become “distractions.” for when Jesus says that Mary has chosen the ONE good thing, Jesus is reminding Martha, and us, that hospitably is about the relationship between the host and the guest. If our focus is on the task, rather than the guest, we have missed the point. Relationship, spending time in each other's' company, listening, being fully present, this the essence of being welcoming.

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<sup>1</sup> Following chumrah, this homily writer uses G-d for the written name.

In this story of Martha, Mary and Jesus, we seem to be given a choice: Martha, busy, distracted: Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, listening. Is this story about the dichotomy between Martha and Mary? Martha on one side: Mary on the other? Upon who should we focus? Well, the choice seems clear. But let's do a "check in" with a show of hands. Whose is for Martha? For Mary? For Jesus? Mary's focus is on the ONE good thing. This is the story of Martha, Mary, and **Jesus**.

This past week, as I pondered the lectionary readings, it occurred to me that this Gospel story is not about who choose the "better part" —Martha compared to Mary—but the interaction that defines "better part." Maybe the point of the story is relationship with the invited friend, the honored guest, and, yes, even extended to the stranger. Because, the Messiah Jesus, is the embodiment of all:

the friend who walks besides us.<sup>2</sup>  
 the honored guest at the table  
 and the stranger who knocks at the still closed door.<sup>3</sup>

The same message is conveyed in the story of Abraham, Sarah and the three visitors. Abraham invites the three visitors for "a little water" and "some bread." That offer of water and bread evolves into quite a bit more. In an over exuberant show of abundance, the visitors are served bread, meat and cheese. There is a lot of behind-the-scenes busy-ness. Think about all the steps involved in transforming the choicest wheat into bread cakes, of roasting the newly slaughtered calf, and making milk into fresh cheese curds. Yet despite the many things needed to provide the guests with this meal that came from field, livestock and milking herd, the focus is on the guests.

Yes, in some way not made completely made clear, we are to understand that the three visitors are the embodiment of G-d. But in this reading, the focus is less on the identity of the three guest, and more on how Abraham and Sarah have honored them. Abraham and Sarah are host. They have offered up extreme hospitality. Abundant hospitality,, well beyond a "little water and bread." But the point is not that many things are done, but how Abraham and Sarah receive guest who appears at the entrance of their dwelling place. This is about relationship.

For me, one of the most illuminating versions of this visitation story is the one shown on the front of this week's worship bulletin. It is a Russian icon by Andrei Rublev, commonly known by the title "the Trinity." Its original name is "the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah." In the background, in the

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 23

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 3:20

upper left corner, we see Abraham's house. The Oak of Mamre is just to the right of the center figure. However this icon is dominated by the three visitors. By contrast, the typical icon of the time showed the three seated visitors in one corners, with other little scenes occupying the rest of the space. These other pictures, vignettes that helped let the story, showed Abraham washing the visitor's feet, Sarah making the bread, the calf being slaughtered and maybe a goat or sheep being milked. They served as reminders of the generosity of Abraham and Sarah. Rublev's revelation in his depiction of the Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah was omit these "distractions", leaving only the three visitors. The focus is on the guests and their relationship between each other, and between the host and these invited ones. The three visitors curve towards each other, in community and contemplation. Through Rublev's icon of hospitality, the viewer is invited to occupy the open end of the table, to sit and spend time, to join these three as they lean in towards each other. This is a foreshadowing of the hospitality of Martha and Mary, where we are reminded to sit, and spend time with Jesus, listening.

For me, the welcoming abundance of food., the care taken in making certain everything is laid out, indeed all the things we at St. James', Clinton, do,:

the many hours our choir spends preparing the anthems,

our community outreach programs

our presence on the village green during farmers' market Thursday,

the food we spread for coffee hour, wine and cheese fellowship and potluck dinners

all of these seem to be a critical to our understanding of who we are as St. James' Clinton. **None** of these should be dismissed lightly, as if unimportant. But **unless** the focus of all of these is centered upon relationship with Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, we miss the point. **It is all distraction.** Everything hangs on how we treat and honor the guest. The critical test is our relationship with the friend, the neighbour and the stranger, for G-d is found in all three: the friend—the person with whom we feel at home: the neighbour, which the Parable of the Good Samaritan identifies not as the cosy, comfortable person next door, but rather the person with whom who we would prefer not to exchange places: and the stranger, the person so alien that we don't even know how to begin to relate. That is G-d's call to us: to listen, to break bread, to pass the peace and to be in communion with all. So, in pondering these two stories, my invitation to each of you is to be intentional present: to set aside time. to listen to what G-d is saying. to choose that part which will not be taken away. So that, together, we, the embodiment of t St. James, Clinton, can be a flourishing branch of the Jesus movement.