

“Southern Hospitality”
Pentecost 6 - 7/21/19 - Gen 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

My BFF, Elizabeth, knows how to “do” hospitality. She has a beautiful, comfy home, a guest room with linen sheets, fluffy towels, bath salts, flowers, padded hangers and a “snack basket.” Once when I was still deeply grieving the loss of canine companions in our home, she even let Sam the Dog snuggle up next to me *on the bed!* Elizabeth was born and raised in Memphis, and she knows how to provide that special Southern Hospitality, which, at its best, makes the guest feel special, and brings honor to the host and her home.

For the past few weeks, our Gospel stories have been about hospitality, and we have seen how simple kindness and the extension of welcome can function in a variety of ways. A few weeks ago, I preached on the Sending of the 70, and we explored hospitality received as the evangelism key: simply connection. Next came the Parable of Good Samaritan, and we saw hospitality received as mercy, basic compassion for someone in need. Today, our Old Testament reading about Abraham and Sarah illustrated hospitality offered as Confession, while our Gospel profiles Mary and Martha, for whom hospitality has become drudgery, because Martha has no motivation other than obligation for extending herself to benefit another.

Historical tidbit #1: Remember, the south (Judea) was where the wealth was, while the north (Israel) was where fields and flocks occupied land. Both stories are set in the Judea, south of Jerusalem - Abraham and Sarah at Hebron, Mary and Martha in Bethany. Common to all of these Biblical examples is the basic pattern of “Southern hospitality.” Three simple things: a time to rest, a shared meal, news from travelers. This is how God’s kingdom comes; as a foundation for future encounters. Because a good host can easily become a good friend or ally, and God is honored in the relationships between his beloved children.

This morning, we visit a familiar story, that of Mary and Martha. Now, you don’t have to know much of the Bible, (or even human history,) to learn early on that getting between sisters is hardly ever a good idea. Sisters have a mysterious bond that makes them competitive, loving and protective all at the same time. Sisters can fight like cats with claws bared; then moments later curl up together to read a book or share a piece of gossip. Martha and Mary were no different, and Jesus took a risk coming between them.

Feminist Christian author Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza uses Martha as an illustration of the Greek word *diakonia* “deacon,” and cites it here as a Biblical precedent for “serving” as ministry, especially for women deeply involved in leading the early church. So, we must not simply admonish Martha for doing what the head of a household was called to do: receive and care for guests! Martha is the host. She had a sister Mary, who is not identified as a resident of the home, and in addition, there no mention of their brother, Lazarus. For whatever reason at this time, this is **Martha’s** house. Now, some would have you believe that this story models good discipleship. But I am troubled by Jesus showing some pretty blatant favoritism – especially between two sisters. What guest of that time would have openly chosen one’s behavior over the other’s? And yet, we know that Jesus often did surprising things and acted in unorthodox ways.

2nd Historical tidbit: many women in the Bible had means, and homes – which might be a surprise since we’ve often spoken of women’s status as property! But many were wealthy widows, others owned property, and some even paid the bills for Jesus’ ministry. Another surprising image would have been Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet – like his student. And a woman learner might have been almost as astonishing to hearers, as the Good Samaritan was to the guy in the ditch!

But **what if** - as some western Christians in medieval times believed - Mary of Bethany was also known as Mary of Magdala, or simply Mary Magdalene. If she had been widowed, she may have kept her husband's wealth as well as the name of the town where they had lived. So, it is possible that Mary, formerly of Bethany, had married a man from Magdala, and was then known as Mary Magdalene. Is it impossible to think that Mary might have been a disciple of Jesus already? That she might have been traveling with Jesus and the 12, and had just now returned to her family home in Bethany? Could that explain Jesus' edge towards Martha, for not treating Mary with some good old Southern Hospitality for her homecoming?

While this connection between two of the number of New Testament Marys was not widely accepted across Protestantism; it might help us explore the sisters' differing ways of following the norms: to make guests feel special, and to bring honor to the host.

You know, we westerners love to take two examples and label one **bad** and one **good**. It's always an either/or situation. Black or white. Day or night. Good or bad. Mary or Martha. But for Jesus' eastern mindset which is rooted in the idea of both/and, instead of the dichotomy of either/or, these two examples of discipleship fit very easily together. And Jesus seems to see them together as a whole.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus taught us what it looks like to love our neighbor. In the story of Martha and Mary, Jesus was pointing out what it looks like to love God. Put 'em together, and what do you get? The Great Commandment: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself."* Hospitable Martha was doing a great job loving neighbor as herself, while Mary was showing us how to love the Lord with all her heart, mind, and strength. Both are essential. Both are faithful. Both are necessary. Mary's is foundational, Martha's was learning how to lean on that solid underpinning. The what of Martha's gift needed the why of Mary's relationship with Jesus to be sustainable and joyful.

And don't fear that Martha was lost. Later in John's gospel, Jesus meets Martha on the road to Lazarus' tomb, where she proclaims, *"I believe that you are the Messiah, the One coming into the world."*

Apparently, Martha was listening, too. Amen.

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Resources: Fortress Commentary on the Bible; Meg Peery McLaughlin, "Home: Where It Starts," at Burke Presbyterian Church, September 10, 2017; Brian McLaren, Festival of Homiletics lecture, Minneapolis, May 2019.

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