



“The Art of Hospitality”

8th Sunday after Pentecost

July 18, 2010

Prayer: Teach us, Lord, to do what is right, and to walk blameless before you, that we may dwell in your shelter. Amen.

You may have wondered why sermon titles have not been listed in the bulletin. Sometimes, it takes awhile to develop a title. Sometimes, a title is thought of after the bulletin has been printed. Other times, such as today, there are several possibilities. “No matter where I serve my guests, they seem to like the kitchen best.” “The length of your to do list”. “The art of hospitality”. The one that catches my attention the most though, is from a colleague of mine in Pittsburgh. Proud of his Danish heritage, he would frequently share with me the saying, ‘beware of entertaining angels unawares’.

Initially, I did not understand the saying. Over the years, I have come to see and learn the meaning of this saying, especially in light of today’s texts. Beware of entertaining angels unawares. In light of today’s lessons, there are indeed those moments in life where we thought we would be the ones to extending hospitality, only to find ourselves on the receiving end of hospitality. To be on the receiving end when we had anticipated being on the giving end are moments of grace in our lives. These moments of grace happen whether or not we knew it at that time, but at times where the meeting of this need comes in unexpected ways. Recently, at a pastor’s meeting of the Lancaster Conference, the host after his congregation fed us, graciously cleaned up our plates, cups, and silverware. A simple task, but one in which the host moved from being host to being a servant

The story of Abraham in our first lesson today intrigues me. I am intrigued because Abraham does not realize he is visited by the Lord and two angels. Nor does our reading from Genesis indicate when Abraham and Sarah recognize the presence of the Lord. What the story does recount is how Abraham recognized the Lord and the two angels as travelers along the way.

At that time, hospitality was the rule of the land. Travelers depended upon hospitality that was extended to them. Hosts relied on the word of their guest to be honest and genuine. Travelers relied on the kindness of their hosts to assist in the watering of animals, providing of food, and a place to sleep for the night. One never knew when they too would need to be a traveler as well.

Imagine the scene with me for a moment: It is a hot, sticky, humid afternoon. After having minor surgery, Abraham is sitting at the door of the tent, in hopes of catching a breeze. Abraham looks up and sees the travelers coming to the door of his tent. Immediately, Abraham invites them in and begins preparing a meal. Not a simple meal, but a feast as quickly as possible. A calf is killed and placed over the fire to cook. Bread is quickly baked and kneaded. Both of these are preparations that take time. Yet at the age of ninety-nine (99), and in the heat of the day, Abraham does not stop. He continues, insisting to Sarah and her servants, "Let's go."

After preparations and serving, Abraham does not sit back, and relax, or take a breath. Rather, Abraham stands by, attentive to their every need and request, standing ready at their beck and call – even when it means answering personal questions, which they do. Questions such as where Sarah is.

When we are planning a large event, whether it be a wedding, or a family meal, or an installation dinner, it is easy to become mired in the details: what color do we want the napkins to be, who is going to sit where, what do we do if it rains later today, how do we change the sanctuary from sanctuary to fellowship hall in a short matter of time? In the details, we can miss seeing people. The angels missed Sarah – they knew she was around, but they missed seeing her.

There are times we come to a family meal, and we ask the question where is . . . They might be down the hall washing their hands, they may have been called away to business elsewhere, we may even have momentarily forgotten that the missing loved one has died.

In the planning of a large event, it is all too easy to get caught up in the details. Even learning unexpectedly that company is coming over can cause the most polished fan of Martha Stewart to become anxious about what to serve and where people will sit. Little details, which in the grander scheme of things can be seemingly insignificant long after the event itself. Details, however, which are important -- at that time.

There is something about company that brings out the best – or the worst in us. We may find ourselves wanting to clean the house from top to bottom when we know the guests will be arriving in 15 minutes, may find ourselves running to the store at the last minute because in the haste of grocery shopping, we forgot one essential item for the favorite dish we want to make. We may even find ways to distract ourselves so that the initial task of preparing becomes lost in other things.

Martha was caught up in the details – so much so – that she grew impatient with Mary for sitting at Jesus' feet. Martha misses the reality of the moment that she is in – the reality JESUS is at her house, here in this moment! This reality is larger than if our favorite celebrity came to OUR house for dinner.

On the other hand, perhaps Martha does see the reality of the situation. This is JESUS after all who is in their house. Perhaps Martha thought everything had to be perfect. Maybe Martha knows the underlying reason of why Jesus is passing through on his way to Jerusalem. In that knowledge, Martha seeks to provide comfort to Jesus. Martha wants Jesus to enjoy himself in the company of friends one final time.

Martha's reaction is a normal human reaction. I can hear Martha slamming pots in the kitchen, and closing cupboard doors none too gently. I can hear Martha muttering under her breath about how unfair it is that SHE has to do all the work, while her sister does nothing. I can hear it, because I know there have been times I have been like Martha.

All too often, we think we can accomplish much in a short amount of time. Thinking we need to accomplish everything, we fail to ask for help. Too many times in my own life, I become wrapped up in the details, the length of my "to do" list that I lose sight, lose focus on what is really important. What is really important in this moment of here and now, is that of spending time with people rather than accomplishing tasks.

Yet there is a tension within today's Gospel. The tension is between doing for Jesus and others, and sitting at Jesus' feet. It is a delicate seesaw of balance between the two.

Over the centuries, today's Gospel has been heard as a text that divides rather than unites hearers into a deeper understanding. At various times, I have heard this text preached that it is better to live a life of prayer than to be doer, active. In saying this, one status is labeled "better" over another. Hearing the text in this way has left many, especially women, offended and feeling forced in having to choose one way of service/ministry over another. I have friends who find meaning in their prayer lives by walking, running, or doing any sort of physical activity. I have other friends who find it equally meaningful to pray through sitting, meditating, reading, or reflecting. One is not right; one is not wrong. Both are equally rich and meaningful.

To preach the Gospel in a way that forces people to choose misses the broader perspective and the deeper reality. It is THIS deeper reality that Jesus is referring to. Jesus is not lifting up Mary over Martha or Martha over Mary. Rather, Jesus is inviting Mary, Martha, and US to be caught up in the moment of being in Jesus' presence -- to the point we forget the details of our daily living: the worry about whether or not we have the money to pay this month's bills. The concern about the long lasting effects of the oil spill in the Gulf. The worry and fear of whether or not our loved ones will return from their military tour of duty. The heartaches and headaches of relationships within our family or friends. All these things when we are in Jesus' presence, Jesus wants us to forget. In forgetting, Jesus wants us to experience the joy that his presence brings.

A story is told that when a church was being built, the developer named it The Church of Saints Mary and Martha. The church needs both in order to continue its work and witness in the world. Consider, when we have company over, and we enjoy being in their company, time seems to stop. What matters at that point is the here and now, the moment. When we enjoy the company of one another, it is easy to lose track of time, easy to forget the worries of the day. It is the same way with Jesus. Jesus wants us to stop, take rest, to enjoy the moment -- to savor those grace moments that break into our to do list, and find us -- not only entertaining angels unaware in our midst, but seeing the presence of God break into our lives in ways we never thought possible. When we allow ourselves to be open to paying attention to "the one needful thing" -- our lives are changed, and shaped by encountering God in our midst -- here and now.

Over three hundred years ago, there was a man named Brother Lawrence – simple man who learned art, discipline, skill, and the joy of living daily in God’s presence. Brother Lawrence was born in Eastern France. He was 18 when he first experienced God, but it would be another six years before he entered the monastery. Brother Lawrence had a limited educational background. In spite of this, he was a man of profound peace that attracted many to him. Brother Lawrence developed a perspective that everything was done for the love of God. Brother Lawrence wrote,

“Men invent means and methods of coming at God’s love, they learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring one’s self into the consciousness of God’s presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not easier and quicker just to do our common business for the love of him?”

(from **The Presence of God** by Brother Lawrence.)

Common business, for Brother Lawrence, regardless of the task, was the medium, the outlet, the avenue for God’s love. Whether he was in the kitchen cooking for his brothers, or repairing sandals, Brother Lawrence found joy daily living in God’s presence.

May God grant us courage and joy of daily living in his presence, now and always, Amen.