

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

We have an emphasis on hospitality in both our first lesson and our gospel this morning. I know I've mentioned before how this was an honor/shame society and the tremendous importance of hospitality in the culture of the time. And of course many of us here this morning were raised in a home where hospitality was simply done. I remember hearing stories of someone pulling up in the yard of relatives who farmed, and how expected or not, they were welcomed, fed and of course given plenty of coffee. My late mother-in-law would talk about how her mom always had something for the unexpected guest, even if it meant killing a chicken for chicken dinner.

Cynthia and I have been the recipients of some incredibly hospitality over the years, sometimes from members who invite us for dinner, sometimes from two of my sisters-in-law who often seem to have a bed and breakfast (along with lunch and dinner) going at their homes.

So imagine for a moment how you would respond if Jesus suddenly showed up at your door sometime just to have some coffee and talk. Jesus comes to the home of Mary and Martha and I suspect Martha immediately started thinking about meals and hospitality and welcoming Jesus, I can imagine her compiling a mental "check-off list" as she's getting everything ready. Now I almost never just show up at someone's door, when I come to visit, I'm expected. I always tell people to not prepare anything special, I don't expect to be fed, I don't need to be fed, if there is coffee already made, I'll certainly have a cup or three, but I'm not expecting to be entertained or have a meal. I come for conversation, sitting on a deck or at the kitchen table is just fine.

Martha's hospitality and generosity are well-intentioned and well-placed, but I began to wonder where we get our motivation when it comes to caring for, to loving one another. In our gospel, Mary is listening to Jesus, I wonder what she heard. We seem to wrestle with so many varied problems today, I wonder if it was really that different two thousand years ago. I wonder who or what can best address the issues with our society that we deal with. I wonder if Mary listening to Jesus then moved into caring for those in need. By the way, Mary was also offering hospitality to Jesus by giving him her full attention.

Our first lesson this morning, from Genesis led me to reflect and wonder again with in the context of hospitality, of listening to God in faith, then acting. Abraham and Sarah visited by three strangers, a good host, Abraham cares for the strangers, and one of them announces that in the next year Sarah, late in her years, is to bear a son. God speaking to the aged couple, a beloved promise for the obedience and service that is to follow.

In both of our readings, we find contexts in which hospitality is encouraged and practiced. These bring a message for you and me and our society. We are visited by strangers, people and perspectives that trouble and frighten us. Some are residents within the country attacked, the attack in Nice, France Thursday evening was appalling. And fear and hatred rear their ugly heads. Some insist that we turn the strangers away to keep us safe. Current political campaigns have a xenophobia theme. We are told that the strangers are taking our jobs or seeking to replace our legal system with Sharia law or perhaps bombing our cities. The solution proposed by some involves building walls or restricting immigration, or testing people of other faiths. But there are risks inherent in living in a free and open society, there are risks in beginning to test others and their beliefs, because where does that stop? Who does the testing and what are the standards that are used? How does one practice hospitality in such a situation? How can we express the extravagant kindness that we have learned from Jesus? Even more troubling, what if Jesus himself is kept from visiting us in the person of one of these strangers?

It's not in our first lesson, but there's a question that God puts to Sarah when she laughs at the idea that she is about to have a child: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" It is a valid question for all of us. Faced with challenges involving social unrest, racial prejudice, and demonstrations that sometimes lead to violence. Some talking heads tell us that these challenges aren't new, that we have come to no resolution after centuries of wrestling with them, others tell you that the problems are all new. Problems include unstable families, lack of education, poor job opportunities, gang violence in urban centers and hopelessness for the future. Contrary to what some suggest, the color of a person's skin is not at the heart of the U.S.'s societal conflicts, but all of the above issues are part of the problem.

So can politicians solve societal problems which in their essence are ethical and spiritual? Because only a believer can ask whether anything is too wonderful for the Lord. I recently came across someone saying that we need to seek a better version of ourselves, a means to become what we have not yet achieved. We know as Christians that we are not yet what we shall be.

Those in our readings this morning, Abraham and Sarah and Mary and Martha, seemed to understand this. Choosing "the better part" involves letting God surprise us and work through us with his promises and his love. When we don't reject what we are called to be, what God seeks to create in us through Jesus' death and resurrection, then we, individually and together, will experience new versions of ourselves and we will see the brother and sister in the stranger, new possibilities in seemingly dead ends, and wonderful love in the place of hopelessness.

AMEN