

Hosting God

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Luke 10:38-42 — Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

It's been said that cleanliness is next to godliness. If that saying is true, then growing up my family was very, very ungodly. My two sisters and I were home-schooled by my mother throughout our childhoods, so we were in the house a lot, and making messes a lot. Though our home was never consistently clean, it was consistently warm and welcoming. In our family, it was hospitality that was next to godliness. I grew up watching my mother host dozens of college students for dinner — my father was a college professor, and he would open up our home to his classes multiple times a year. On those evenings, the hours leading up to the students' arrival were always chaotic. We scrambled to create the semblance of a tidy life downstairs, while the upstairs remained a total disaster. The scrambling ended the moment the first guest arrived, though, and at that moment my mom slipped into hostess mode with seeming effortlessness.

Just as I grew up watching my mom host guests, she grew up watching her mom do so. Danny Colladay, my grandmother, was the wife of a general in the Army Air Corps, and in this role she frequently entertained distinguished guests in Washington DC, Brussels Belgium, and Seoul South Korea. I'd like to think that I've learned a thing or two from my mother and grandmother. My desire to be a good host and a hospitable person is a part of my desire for godliness.

In today's Old Testament and Gospel readings, we meet three women, each of whom is, in one way or another, hosting God. They are three very different women with very different experiences of the world, and I believe that they each have something unique to teach us this morning about service, self-care, and discipleship.

Let's start with Sarah — a woman who doesn't receive much attention in churches today, but who is absolutely essential to Christianity as we know it — as well as to the other two Abrahamic faiths. She is the mother of the people of Israel, a matriarch — although that word suggests a kind of power that Sarah does not possess. Like all other wives of her time and place, and of most times and in most places, Sarah was expected to show absolute obedience and deference to her husband. She was regarded not only as his servant, but also as his property. We see this clearly and painfully in Genesis 12, when Abraham and Sarah are passing through Egypt, and Abraham decides to give her over to pharaoh to become one of his many wives. The

exchange doesn't last long, but not because Sarah has any say in the matter. In every circumstance, more or less, cultural custom obligates her to do whatever Abraham tells her to do. So, in our reading today, when Abraham rushes into their tent and says to her "bake some bread," Sarah of course obeys.

At first, this story here seems to be focused on Abraham. He's the one to whom these three mysterious travelers appear; he's the one who invites them to stay a while and share a meal; he's the one who gives the orders to his servants, and he's the one who plays the host for the guests as they eat, while Sarah remains unheard and unseen.

But then, while these intriguing guests are eating, they say something that shifts the story's focus. "Where is your wife Sarah?", they ask. According to the story, Abraham has not told these guests his wife's name, so the fact that they speak it indicates for us, the story's audience, that these messengers have supernatural access to such knowledge. And yet, ironically, the question that they ask when they speak Sarah's name has an obvious answer. See, given the cultural context, there is really no other place where Sarah can be. She cannot be out on the town with her friends, she cannot be *anywhere* without her husband's accompaniment, and the fact that the guests were just served freshly-baked bread means that their host's wife is nearby and hard at work. I can imagine the tone of Abraham's response to their question, a tone of stating the obvious: "she's in the tent." Why then do the three guests bother to ask? Why is the question recorded for us in this text? I think that by asking, and by naming Sarah, these messengers of God shift the focus off of Abraham, who so often takes center stage in these stories, and onto Sarah, who is so often behind the scenes. The last verse of our reading confirms that the focus has shifted, for the prophecy that these divine messengers have come to proclaim begins not with Abraham, but with Sarah: "I will surely return to you in due season," they say, "and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Throughout the past week, this story has been reminding me that God's eye is always on those who work behind the scenes — behind the tent door, if you will. Though Abraham may take Sarah for granted at times, God does not. God sees her and blesses her in her daily tasks, in her baking of bread. For ancient Israelite culture, and in fact for many traditional Middle Eastern cultures today, bread is a necessary staple of life. It is the main source of nourishment; it is also in fact one's utensils; it is to be baked and shared and consumed every day. Those who bake bread, then, are absolutely necessary for life in these societies. But sometimes the people who do the work that is most necessary, in our homes and in our communities, sometimes those are the people who are also most easy to neglect. This morning, let us be reminded that God notices and celebrates the work of people like Sarah, and just as God's messengers asked Abraham "Where is your wife Sarah?", let us be open to hearing God ask us "Where are your bread-bakers? Do you take them for granted? And can you think of a new way to tell them 'thank you?'"

Martha, in our Gospel reading, may be a bread-baker like Sarah, but she is not the lowly wife that Sarah was. The story in Luke's Gospel says that Martha welcomed Jesus and his disciples into *her* home. Apparently, she is a woman of at least moderate means, a woman of independence, and a woman of action. She is working hard to make Jesus' visit as enjoyable as

possible, which involves preparing a decent, substantial meal for him, and his disciples. Unlike Abraham, she doesn't have servants to help, so naturally she would appreciate her sister Mary's assistance. Apparently, Martha doesn't think that Mary will listen to her, so she tries to enlist Jesus' help with the matter: *Hasn't Mary been sitting there long enough, Jesus? Don't you think that she could come gimme a hand here?*

Jesus sees the frustration on Martha's face and senses the anxiety in her tone. His response is tender and caring: "Martha, Martha. You are worried and distracted by many things." Notice that Jesus never tells Martha to stop working and instead be like Mary; it's not that what Martha's doing is wrong; it's that the way she's doing it, and the expectations that she's bringing to it, are wearing her out and robbing her of joy. And Jesus cares about that. Jesus cares about the state of Martha's mind, heart, and body — more about that, in fact, than he cares about the quality of the meal that she prepares.

Throughout this week, Martha has been reminding me that God wants us to take care of ourselves as we go about completing our many God-given tasks. We do well to strive for excellence in our work, of course, but we need not sacrifice our well-being to achieve it. God doesn't want our tasks, even our very good and noble ones, to make us slaves to anxiety and exhaustion. Based on this story, I think that Jesus would rather be served a few pieces of bread by a happy and healthy Martha than an elaborate three-course meal by a worried and distracted Martha. This morning, let us be reminded that God doesn't demand a flawless feast from us; rather, God asks for our daily bread.

Lastly, we turn to Mary. Many of us are familiar with this image of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, and for many of us it's a sweet, quaint, perfectly harmless image. But actually, Mary was engaging in a quite controversial act. We could say that she was not behaving very lady-like in this story. Because Jesus is a rabbi, and any rabbi's students would sit at their rabbi's feet and listen to him. And in Jesus' day, there is no such thing as a female student of a rabbi. Women are not supposed to be religious pupils; their place is preparing the meals. So when Jesus commends Mary for listening to him, he is not commending her for being quaintly pious; he is commending her for a socially disruptive activity. Mary's act of devotion, her practice of discipleship, *is* a socially disruptive activity.

Of course, we can't sit at Jesus' feet today. But what would it look like for us to be disciples like Mary? Might we be called to serve God in ways that disrupt social custom for the sake of faithfulness to God's will? Jesus was known as a friend of sinners; his hospitality was so open and so generous that it was controversial. May the Spirit grant each of us the strength and the courage to extend the radical hospitality of Jesus at some point in our week ahead. Amen.