

Sixth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): “Abraham, Martha & Mary, St. Teresa and Brother Lawrence”

Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

July 21-22, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I’m happy that a change of plans landed Kristiane home for the weekend. She was planning to participate in a Tough Mudder event on Long Island this Sunday, but it was cancelled because of the heat. A critical mass of participants, planners, medical personnel who would’ve been on-call, wisely decided it would be dangerous to engage in extreme sports during a heat emergency. The combo of heat, humidity, and exertion under these conditions can kill you.

‘Same in the desert, in Abraham & Sarah’s time. That’s why offering hospitality wasn’t simply a kindness, it was a societal expectation, a religious requirement. It’s a long way between oases. Deny someone water, food, shelter in the unforgiving desert and you’re consigning them to death.

We’ve got 2 people offering hospitality in this weekend’s Scripture: Abraham in the 1st lesson from Genesis, and Martha in St. Luke’s Gospel. Abraham pulls out all the stops, modestly offering “a little water” (Gen. 18:4a), “a little bread” (Gen. 18:5a), and going on to serve cakes and calf, curds and milk. We don’t know what was on Martha’s menu, but I’m betting it was tasty.

Abraham welcomed strangers, extravagantly. We know, though he didn’t when he invited them in, that these were heavenly, angelic visitors. Martha & Mary welcomed Jesus, whom we assume they knew. So each one entertained the Lord, in his or her own way. Hospitality, most broadly, means welcoming guests. We people of faith are invited and expected to welcome others as we have been welcomed. Remember what we read in Hebrews 13 (verse 2)?

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

One of the angels Abraham welcomed left behind glad news:

"I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."
(Genesis 18:10a)

The story plays out differently in the Gospel. Mary is sitting happily at the Lord's feet, soaking up every word He says.

But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand." The Master said, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing way too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it – it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."
(Luke 10:40-42, *The Message*)

Hospitality, loving service is essential, both to those within and beyond the community of faith. That's why we're helping to host Family Promise guests this week, supporting refugee resettlement through Interfaith RISE and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, addressing both local and world hunger, donating and delivering furniture, linens and kitchen goods to whoever needs them. We take seriously the words we find in the 1st letter of John (1 John 4:20):

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

Worship, loving devotion to God is also essential. It's through Word & Sacrament that we receive grace to put our shoulder to the Kingdom plow, living water to sustain us when our souls thirst, resurrection hope to keep us going when it seems our efforts to sustain life fall flat and lifeless. It's not one or the other; it's both/ and. We must embody both Martha & Mary. I like this observation from a commentary:

...we must not cartoon the scene [in Luke's Gospel.... If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever.¹

We're to be both Martha & Mary. Our church friend Ruth Walsh has always been a Mary-like one among us. She led our Intercessory Prayer group for years, and is still a great woman of prayer. Ruth loves Teresa of Avila, a great Spanish mystic, who wore a red dress when she entered the monastery, played the castanets so the sisters could dance during their recreation period, and who said:

“Know that even when you are in the kitchen, our Lord moves among the pots and pans.”

Teresa lived in the 16th century. Another holy, wise one, whom we know as Brother Lawrence lived in the century after her. Teresa was very educated; Lawrence was not. She was Spanish; he was French. She was a nun, a reformer of her Carmelite order; he was a lay brother, a kitchen helper. But he also found God among the pots and pans. He wove together work and worship seamlessly. Brother Lawrence said:

[It is not] needful that we should have great things to do... We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God.²

Our hospitality toward God is alive in our loving service of neighbor and in our welcoming of our Lord in Word & Sacrament. God grant us grace to be faithful to both. Amen

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Luke (Interpretation)*, Louisville: John Knox, 1990), p. 152.

²“Brother Lawrence: Practitioner of God’s Presence,” *Christianity Today* (July/August 2019), online.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham