

“My House is Your House”
A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 18th, 2010
(Genesis 18:1-10; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42)

Lord Jesus, you have opened your door to us; help us to open our doors to you. You have entered into our lives; help us to enter the lives of others. Remembering the way that you graciously received us, help us to graciously receive others. As you have listened to us, so open our hearts to listen to you. Amen.

Last Sunday, listening the parable of the good Samaritan, we heard Jesus tell the legal expert that there comes a time to “go and do likewise.” Go and do like the Samaritan. This Sunday, having dinner with Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary, we hear Jesus tell the sisters that there comes a time to sit and listen. Just sit and listen to Jesus. There is a time to do. There is a time to be. There is a time to act. There is a time to listen. “For everything there is a season,” say the familiar words of Ecclesiastes, “and a time for every matter under heaven... .” There is a time to “go and do likewise,” and there is time to sit and listen. Now is the time to sit and listen.

I’m not sure which of these sisters you identify with, but, for me, it is a whole lot easier to “go and do likewise” with Martha in the kitchen than it is to sit and listen with Mary at Jesus’ feet. Call it the Protestant work ethic. Call it my up-bring. Call it the overly responsible fourth child in a family of five. I have this need to get on the move, get organized, get to the details, get things done, and then start the cycle all over again going and doing. And one of the most challenging disciplines in my life is to stop going and doing and to sit and listen quietly in prayer for what Jesus has to say, to be still and know that I am *not* God.

In our frenzied world, I think there is nothing more difficult than observing Sabbath time, a time to rest in the presence of the Creator and enjoy the creation. I suppose much of this has to do with living in a culture that places a premium on going and doing but has very little value for listening and being, “being still [with the psalmist] and knowing that I am God.”

We Americans have always been on the move, pushing westward, always going some place, finding some new frontier to explore. Going and doing is in our blood. I don’t need to remind you that, like Martha, we are “distracted by our many tasks . . . worried and distracted by many things.” And those worries and distractions, like Martha’s many tasks, can become so damaging that we may begin to resent others for what we call their laziness, irresponsibility, or lack of motivation for not also being caught up in our going and doing: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself.” I’ve used that line around here, how about you?

Jesus reassures us, amid the flurry of having too much to do, that “there is need of only one thing.” There is need to rest and to be fed in his presence. As Moses said long ago, “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” “Do not labor for the food which perishes,” Jesus told the crowds, “but for the food which endures to eternal life... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

So Martha expresses hospitality by offering Jesus “food which perishes,” and that’s great; while Mary expresses hospitality by receiving “the food which endures to eternal life,” and that’s even greater, Jesus says. “Mary has chosen the better portion,” he points out.

There is a time to go and do. There is a time to sit and listen. The church has recognized throughout the ages that we are to “pray and labor, and labor and pray” (*Ore et labore.*) You cannot do one without the other.

Here’s a story about two sisters who risk showing hospitality in different ways to the stranger, the “other,” whose name is Jesus. And by showing hospitality to the stranger, like Abraham and Sarah of old, they receive the very presence of God into their lives. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” the Letter to the Hebrews says, echoing the experience of Abraham and Sarah, “for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

This “other” has no home. He is constantly on the move. He eats what is set before him. He sits among strangers. He even challenges his hosts, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” Hospitality, we hear in this story, takes guts, it takes courage, it takes a risk, especially for two unmarried sisters who dare to welcome this homeless rabbi into the inner sanctum of their home. Remember, a rabbi in Jesus’ day would never have entered the home of an unmarried woman, nor would rabbis ever allow women to sit at their feet as one of their students. Here again, we see Jesus is turning everything upside down, treating Martha and Mary as full-fledged disciples, teaching them as he would teach any man, and giving himself to them without reserve. This is hospitality. This is what Jesus does: he offers himself without reserve, without excuses, without holding back, without concern for himself.

You’ve heard me quote a familiar Jewish proverb that says, “God gave us two ears but only one mouth, therefore we ought to listen twice as much as we speak.” People sat at a teacher’s feet in that world to listen in order to become teachers themselves. They sat and listened in order that they could go and do likewise. Mary is training for discipleship; and Jesus praises Mary for listening, for choosing the “better part,” for taking the role of a student in the living room rather than the traditional role which Martha has assumed in the kitchen.

Martha has chosen to “go and do” for Jesus. She’s doing the hospitable thing for Jesus. Mary has chosen to “sit and listen” to Jesus. She’s also doing the hospitable thing for Jesus. She is treating the guest as the guest desires to be treated. Both the kitchen and the living room are necessary in the life of a disciple. It’s just that Mary has chosen the better part of the meal; and perhaps Jesus is saying that this conversation with him is the main course, maybe the only course.

Hospitality means opening the doors of our homes to the “other,” but hospitality also means opening the doors of our hearts to Jesus just the way we are doing this morning when we listen to his Word and eat with him at his Table. Such hospitality is very risky, risky because it requires opening the door into the inner sanctum of the heart where we allow the guest to see us, to be with us, and to speak to us on his terms.

One of the unique aspects of Israel's identity was its mandate from God to show hospitality to strangers, to sojourners, remembering that Israel itself was also a stranger and a sojourner. Hospitality toward a stranger was seen as Israel's right response to what God had done for these people who were “aliens in the land of Egypt.” Abraham and Sarah receive three strangers by the oaks of Mamre who bring the unbelievable news about the birth of a son in their old age.

“My house is your house!” Abraham says by his generous acts of hospitality. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” “For I was hungry and you gave me food,” Jesus says, “I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

“My house is your house!”

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking,” Jesus says, “if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”

“My house is your house!”

“Contribute to the needs of the saints,” Paul urges the Romans, “extend hospitality to strangers.”

“My house is your house!”

This is communion with God through our Lord Jesus who “was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

When we find ourselves feeling distracted, worried, resentful of others, it is time to stop, sit and listen with Mary at the Lord’s feet. It is time to come to church.