

## **“Finding Hospitality”**

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Genesis 18:1-10a

Luke 10:38-42

### **Introduction**

Abraham and the three visitors under the oak trees at Mamre. Mary and Martha visited by Jesus. These are two very different pictures of hospitality and welcome in the story of Scripture. There are hundreds of stories in the Bible about welcome and hospitality. And like last week’s gospel text, we’ve probably heard read hundreds of times—and preached on about as much. Yet, these stories that we have heard this morning have a certain power; a resonance which can be missed in a casual reading of the text or that we might have forgotten in how many times we have heard this story preached on. It is the story of finding welcome in God’s hospitality. So often we see hospitality and welcome as separate things; however, I have come to discover that these two virtues are inextricably linked together in the lives of Children of God.

### **Point 1 – Two Examples of Hospitality and Welcome**

Mary and Martha are welcoming Jesus into their home. This would be a big deal in that day, so you can understand when Martha comes to Jesus and says, “Tell her to help me.” Having served many times as the host of a party, I feel more comfortable to make sure that everyone else is having a good time, because that

makes me feel good. Martha somewhat strikes me as one of these kind of people. She is more content making sure that Jesus—who is the guest of honor in her house—is having a good time. Yet, we cannot always host a party by ourselves. At some point we need some help in making sure everything is cooked and cleaned up. And I'm pretty certain that Martha, more than once, asked Mary to help her. So she complains a bit to Jesus. And yet, as Jesus often does, he throws Martha a curve ball—"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." What the heck? Jesus is the *guest* and they are the *hosts*, so what is he doing by saying this? Let's consider this another way—who is the host and who is the guest?

Under the oaks of Mamre, Abraham sees three men passing by. We don't have any description of these travelers other than they were just passing by Abraham's camp and Abraham offers them hospitality. Perhaps they looked tired and weary, perhaps not. Maybe they appeared in a particular way to Abraham that he knew that there was something special about these travelers. In this example, Abraham is the host and the travelers are the guests, yet it sets a precedent that has continued to shape and influence our Jewish brothers and sisters as well as creep its way into our Christian experience. It is offering hospitality to the complete stranger; offering that welcome in a genuine selfless act of love. In recalling the

history of faith, Paul recalls the story of Abraham under the oaks of Mamre in his letter to the Hebrews. It is remembering that God comes to us in a myriad of ways, and we must be prepared to offer welcome to the stranger, offering hospitality to all who need it. Some have said that when we truly entertain the stranger—unconditionally and selflessly—we are entertaining God, but like wise will be honored guests of God at the great heavenly feast. It is in those acts of selfless welcome and hospitality that we are blessed by God. Not a blessing of the warm and fuzzy kind, but blessed in a way that is life changing, a reflection of the image of God within us, and a reflection of the love God has for all God's creation.

So let me come back to Mary and Martha: while we are inclined to think that they are the hosts. Yet, what if we thought of it this way? What if Jesus was the host and Mary and Martha were the guests? From this perspective, Martha's anger is misplaced. By being distracted in all of the work that comes with being the host, Martha has forgotten about the invitation that Jesus has extended to us: to hear the Good News of God.

## **Point 2 – A Personal Example**

My grandparents, Wally and Helen, are great, loving, Christian people, but also great examples of how hospitality and welcome are best expressed; how to live out the love of God, though the example of Jesus Christ, in the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. My grandparents are both retired and like to travel a lot; they'd

even bought a motor home for those times. It happened one afternoon that Grandpa had gone outside to do some work in the yard and noticed that the door of the motor home was open. Now it had been happenstance that the motor home's door was unlocked. He checked on it and found a woman sleeping in the back. Rather than being angry about her intrusion into their property, he was concerned for her. He woke the woman and made sure that she was all right, at least in the short term. He welcomed her into their house and Grandma made her some food. She seemed all right, but concern for her safety, they telephoned the police and they escorted the woman to the hospital. Through this whole situation, my grandparents shared their hospitality with this woman that they did not know: acting in the love of God as shown by Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. They did not need to help this woman, but out of love they did. They shared God's welcome unconditionally.

### **Point 3 – Finding Welcome**

God's hospitality welcomes all—no exceptions. Jesus does not say to Martha, "Mary's in, you're out." Rather Jesus is saying, "Martha, you have welcomed me. Let me welcome you; the rest is just details." In Christ, God has come to us in loving welcome and embrace. We have the opportunity to respond to this hospitality and help others in finding welcome in God. Our response opens us to receive the blessing of God as well as others. The challenge of response,

though, must begin with us. When the opportunity is presented, we must respond first. God continually presents these opportunities for welcome in hospitality, coming in a myriad of forms—oftentimes, we do not know what form it has taken until we are presented with it. It goes beyond having a “hospitality committee” in the church or having some extras at coffee hour. Welcome in hospitality goes beyond the walls of the church. It is the challenge to welcome someone unconditionally at every opportunity presented—not when it’s comfortable.

We do well to remember that God’s welcome is extended to us, no matter what we do—because of God’s hospitality. We are loved and forgiven. It takes courage to offer the welcome of God’s hospitality to world. After all, the world is full of stranger; people who do not look like us, think like us, act like us, and so on. They’re strange, make strange looks, make strange noises, etc., etc. Yet in all of this, they are still children of the Creator God and deserving of God’s welcome. In Jesus Christ, we are shown the way to welcome them. Through the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to welcome them. God’s love in Christ is welcome for us.

## **Conclusion**

We have a slogan in our UCC promotional toolkit, something that has proven time and again to not only be a great marketing tool, but a great way of being the Church of Christ: “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” Personally, I love this statement; it fits with my

personal theology and my beliefs about what it means to be church. There is great welcome in this statement, but there is also challenge. The challenge comes from the first part of the statement: “No matter *who* you are, or *where* you are on life’s journey...” This means that we have to accept that facet of people, no matter what. Something we do well, but something we could get better at. Let us embrace the challenge and welcome each stranger with boldness and love unconditionally.

Amen.