The Better Part

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

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

*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won’t be taken away from her.*

 *Luke 10:41-42*

 John Thomas is one of the most gifted preachers I have ever been around. When I first met John, he was the chief ecumenical officer for the United Church of Christ. During the time we were colleagues in the national offices of our denomination, I had the privilege of hearing him speak on several occasions. When he was elected as General Minister and President, he led us through a time of profound change in the United Church of Christ and in general, the Christian Church in general. In one speech during his time as GMP, he spoke about what it means to be a welcoming church. He used a term that has become a byword in our denomination’s self-understanding: extravagant hospitality. John was addressing the vision for our churches, the need to open wide our doors and hearts to those who have not felt welcomed by churches. The word “extravagant” expresses the need to go beyond a minimalist approach and throw wide the doors of our churches and our hearts. You know, it’s very biblical, reminiscent of the father in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, who did not just let the wayward son back into the household, but rather threw a party.

 Hospitality, as I have frequently said, is one of the fundamental values within our faith. And it is hospitality that is at the center of the two passages of scripture in this week’s lectionary. The story from Genesis focusses on Abraham. If you know the life of the patriarch Abraham, you know this occurrence happened a long time after he made covenant with God. God’s part of the bargain was to promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation and his descendants would be many.

 It didn’t seem like it turned out that way. He and his wife Sarah were well into the senior citizen category when we pick them up in this story. No kids, no great nation. To his credit, Abraham did not end up a cynical old man. His faith remained intact and he sought to live up to his end of the covenant.

 That’s when these three strangers appeared. Old Testament scholars and theologians have tried to explain who these three men were. Some say they were angels. Maybe. Some say they are representative of the Trinity. I don’t know. For me, they were simply men, to whom God spoke and sent to Abraham with a message. We’ll get to that later.

 But what I want to have us focus on is Abraham’s response. These three men show up out of the blue, unannounced, and how does Abraham react? He throws a luau! He doesn’t give them a bread and butter sandwich and a glass of water and send them on his way, glad to have fulfilled his hospitality obligation. Here is how the writer describes Abraham’s response to the three uninvited guests: “And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.” [Genesis 18:6-8] Talk about extravagant hospitality!

 It is at this point that the three men deliver the message from God: Abraham, God will fulfill the promise made in the covenant. You will have a son by the time we return in a short while.

 Fast forward now a thousand years or so to the visit of Jesus to the household of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It is a much less spectacular story than its Old Testament counterpart, but equally important. Jesus drops in on his old friends – it is interesting that Lazarus is not mentioned (one can only speculate why). Luke tells us, **she** (Martha) welcomed him. [Luke 10:38] He does not say Martha and Mary welcomed him, just Martha, the older sibling. As soon as Martha greeted her old friend, she set about doing what a good host does, according to the customs of the day. She makes sure Jesus is comfortable and heads for the kitchen, wherein she starts to prepare a meal, opens a bottle of her best wine, and sets the table, the many tasks involved in caring for her guest. It’s what hospitality implies, don’t you know. In the meantime, she notices that she is alone in her duties. Where’s Mary? She looks into the living room, and there she is, sitting at Jesus’ feet, soaking up every word out of his mouth. Well, of all the nerve! She marches into the living room, gets in the face of Jesus and tells him, “Jesus, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” [Luke 10:40b] This, it seems to me, is a reasonable request. Why do I have to get stuck with all the work? There’s a lot to do and I could use some help here. Jesus’ response? He gently chides the responsible 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.” [Luke 10:41-42]

 These two stories out of our Jewish/Christian tradition provide clues as to the importance of hospitality in our faith. In a commentary referring to the Abraham story, the writer of the Book of Hebrews notes, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. [Hebrews 13:2] When Abraham took in these strangers, he did not know who they were. I wonder if he would have acted any differently, shown any more hospitality, if he knew these were messengers sent from God to reveal an answer to a promise? I think not.

 Hospitality is an often-forgotten value in being Christian today. It should happen in church and most, if not all, of you are pretty good at it. But hospitality, as we learned last week in the parable of the Good Samaritan, needs our attention and practice in the world as well. It can even happen in the checkout line at Walmart. This story was posted a while back:

Lindsay Rae had stopped by Walmart for a few items on that particular day in 2013. While waiting in line with her whiny toddler, she came across one mother in front of her “fumbling with clothes items.” She also saw her five children, who “were a mix of Caucasian and Hispanic,” some of whom seemed underdressed for the cold weather. Rae took notice of the mother and her five children when she overheard some hurtful remarks a couple behind her were making about them. The well-dressed couple were “loudly whispering” about the mother: “How many baby daddies do you think she has?” “Can’t even dress those kids for weather,” they went on to say. “Just wait until she whips out the food stamps,” ridiculed the couple. As the mom was trying to separate the food from the clothing, she was also trying to manage the food stamps. More nasty remarks were heard from the pair behind … “There’s our tax dollars neatly at work,” the couple said smugly. Having nine kids herself, Rae empathized with the mom who was struggling. She looked at the couple behind and “shot them what I can only imagine was the death glare only a mother of 9 can execute to perfection.” Then, Rae stepped forward and kindly asked the poor mom: “Can I help?” The woman looked at her, and she quietly asked: “Foster or Adopted?” Rae let the mom know she has “9 kiddos,” two of them biological. The woman smiled embarrassingly and revealed that she was a new foster mom, and it was also her first time using food stamps. “They came 3 days ago,” the woman explained. “Gonna be with us for a while. They gave us food, but the kids needed clothes. But no stipend has come through yet.” Rae looked at the children and smiled, then turned to her and said: “Beautiful children I am glad you all have each other.” She kindly showed the woman how to use the food stamps before giving her a hug and whispering, “You’ve got this.” After the mother finished checking out all her things, she and her five children went on their way. Rae waited till the woman and her kids were out of earshot before she turned to glare at the couple behind her with tears in her eyes. She said: “Those children? They lost the right to live with their parents just days ago. Those clothes? Probably the only clothes they own or got to leave their home with. THAT woman? Opened her home to kids—kids that needed a safe place to go, when the one they lived in no longer proved safe enough or secure enough for them. The food stamps, something health and welfare helps an already mother to two feed three new mouths. There are not nearly enough women or people like her this world.”



As Rae started loading her things on the conveyor belt, she realized she wasn’t finished with the couple behind her.

With her voice shaking, she told the couple: “AND even IF those kids were all hers, and she had a dozen ‘baby daddies’ and was on food stamps. . . no child in this country or any other deserves to be cold or hungry. I am sorry, but your behavior? Poorly done, VERY poorly done.” The couple apparently “left my checkout aisle and joined another, silently.” The cashier, who had witnessed all of this, said to Rae with a smile and a wink, “[I’m a] single mother on WIC, what you said? Rocked!” She grimaced and replied: “Thanks, I wasn’t sure I should have gone off like that…hug those babies of yours tight tonight.”

 Hospitality is not only an act of compassion and caring. Sometimes it serves as a prophetic word as well, a word needing to be spoken in a sometimes cold and judgmental world. Always and everywhere, hospitality is a witness to a God who welcomes all and encourages us to be, not obligingly, minimally hospitable, but extravagantly, over-the-top so. At church, in your home, in the line as the supermarket, be the welcoming presence God wants and the world so desperately needs.