

SERMON TITLE: "Lessons from Hospitality"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 10:38-42 (Children's story from Genesis 18:1-9)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 28, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Yes, I was gone from you the past two Sundays and the weeks that preceded them. I went to Northwestern Montana, got my mom, and we went on a 3000-mile road trip together. We had a great time and enjoyed the hospitality of many friends, relatives, and professionals along the way.

Thanks again to all of you who pitched in and made ministry happen here while I was gone. Thanks to those of you who worked in the yard and cleaned the church so that it would be a pleasant environment. Thanks to the Youth and their leaders who led worship on July 14, sharing about their mission trip to Atlanta. Thanks to the United Methodist Men and David Barron who led worship last Sunday. Thanks to those of you who unlocked the doors, turned on the lights, greeted and ushered, made the coffee, and served the fellowship refreshments. Thanks to those of you who attended worship, prayed for the sick, welcomed the visitors, carried on conversations, and made sure everyone felt like they belonged. Hospitality is an essential ministry of any church.

Hospitality has always been an important issue for God's people. The Old Testament story that I read to the children about Abraham and Sarah welcoming their three visitors is an ancient example of that. The New Testament scripture Lori just read for us is another example. This morning I invite you to consider with me this story from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10. What are its lessons from hospitality?

1—LEARN FROM JESUS

The first lesson from hospitality we see in this story is the obvious one that we've all been taught since we were little kids in Sunday School. The most important thing we can ever do is learn from Jesus. When Martha came to Jesus with her complaint that Mary wasn't helping with the hospitality chores, Jesus made it clear that Mary had chosen the better part. Mary's desire to listen to

Jesus was good. Listening to him attentively was the effective way to let Jesus shape her thinking and behaviors. Focusing on his demeanor and his attitudes would help Mary see and follow his way of salvation. Mary's priority of attention to Jesus' teachings was not to be diminished, challenged, or criticized. In no uncertain terms, said Jesus—if a choice had to be made—then sitting at his feet, learning from him, was to be upheld as the higher value.

This importance of learning from Jesus is echoed in the Gospel of Matthew 11:28-30. There Jesus said, "Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus had high hopes and expectations of his followers, to be sure. Not everyone was willing to sacrifice their wealth or let go of their status and egos in the ways that Jesus taught. But if they would shed those burdens, and humble themselves as Jesus was humble, he promised them a better life, a more peaceful life, a more abundant life. If they were willing to lose their life for his sake, Jesus promised them they would find it.

This is the message Jesus wanted Mary and Martha to hear. There is something better than the burdens of busyness and the worries of work that so easily define us. The better part is to learn from Jesus.

2—PUT AWAY DISTRACTIONS

Of course, learning from Jesus isn't done in a vacuum—or without a vacuum. So a second lesson from hospitality is that learning from Jesus is easier to do if we put away distractions. And sometimes that means we have to tidy up our environment a bit and put away the mess.

I don't know about you, but I find it very hard to concentrate if there's a lot of chaos around me. For example, I usually have to clean the papers off my desk and clean up my email inbox before I can

really get into preparing my sermon. Certainly not everything gets done first, but I have to make some clear physical and spiritual space for God to speak to me.

And, for sure, it would be hard for us to worship God in this sanctuary if the floor were dirty and the pews were littered with old bulletins. It would be difficult for anyone to want to come to the church and spend time with Jesus if the yard were overgrown with weeds. Not many of us would like to come early for Sunday School and stay after worship for fellowship time if the restrooms were unsanitary. Those would be major distractions for most of us that would hinder our participation and attendance.

So, “thank you” to all of you hardworking Martha-type folks who care about that side of hospitality. Thank you to those of you who did your work earlier in the week, so you are free to worship with us now. Thank you to those of you who came early this morning or who will stay later after worship to serve food and clean up or to count the offering. Thank you for those who are serving right now as organist, song leader, liturgist, and ushers to make this worship service happen. It would be very difficult for us to have this ministry without you and your concern for these details. Please know that we appreciate you, and we pray that you feel God’s blessings as you serve in these various ways.

But I want you all to listen to me very carefully. If you ever feel distracted by duties or burdened by busyness to the point that you are not having time to sit at Jesus’ feet and learn from him, then something is out of balance. That is a prime indicator of spiritual malnutrition or burnout. If you feel like you are giving more to the church than you are getting from God, that’s a big red flag. If you feel like you are becoming resentful that other people aren’t doing as much as you are at church, at home, or at your job, that’s a warning sign to which you need to pay serious attention.

When we, by nature or by nurture, have the sense that our self-worth is dependent on how hard we work, how perfectly we perform, or—these days—how many friends we keep up with on Facebook, we have the ability to work ourselves right into the ground—physically, socially, and

spiritually. We must take care. This is where our Protestant theology of grace is quite helpful. As Ephesians 2 tells us, we are not saved by our own works, but by the gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

I really don't think Jesus was condemning Martha's desire to have a clean house or to provide a meal for her hungry family and guests. Jesus was simply responding to the frustration that Martha was feeling and expressing. She was burdened, stressed, anxious, and resentful. And she didn't need to be. No one else was putting that on her. She could choose differently. There was a better way. Martha needed to put away her distractions, and learn from Jesus, so she could relax in his grace and receive healing for her soul.

3--APPLICATION QUESTIONS

I recently read an article in *The Christian Century* magazine that talked about this Mary-Martha story in regard to our relationship with Jesus and our relationships with other people. The author suggested a list of questions that could help us apply this text to ourselves. I'll read the list to you. Maybe there are some lessons from hospitality here for you.

- *How do you determine which work is important and which work doesn't really matter?*
- *If Jesus sat in your living room, how would he direct your attention?*
- *What work or anxieties would keep you from paying full attention to Jesus while he was there?*
- *How can you care for your soul, without feeling resentful of or judged by others?*
- *If you are listening to Jesus, what message is he speaking to you?*
- *How do you hear God's voice amid the noise of the chores?*
- *Are you in danger of neglecting the upkeep work that might be necessary?*
- *Who is doing work so that you have the time to sit with important issues?*
- *Who needs to hear you say, "Thank you"?*
- *Who around you simmers with anger and frustration?*

- How can you ease their concern?
- Or, if necessary, how can you free yourself from their frustration?
- *How can you create meaningful encounters with people who may not be focused on the most important things?**

CONCLUSION

In all our life, and in this summertime season of travel and guests, it makes a lot of sense for us to think about these questions of hospitality. Who is responsible for cooking and cleaning and mowing the lawn? Who is responsible for paying the restaurant bill? Who is responsible for thinking about and planning for activities? Who is responsible for relationships and reservations? Who is responsible for knowing when it's time to leave and go home?

That last question reminds me of a conversation I had once with a colleague. Emilee is a United Methodist pastor in Colorado, but she grew up in Germany. I don't know if this is a German custom, or if she just picked the idea up somewhere along the way. Emilee said that whenever she has guests staying at her house, she puts only one full roll of toilet paper in the guest bathroom. When it runs low, that's a signal that their time is running out and they should go home.

Whether that's your style or not, we all have certain sensibilities and tolerances, aptitudes and needs. And so do others. So, we should be grateful for their work, and grateful for the time we all might be allowed to relax and enjoy each other's company.

Especially, we can appreciate and utilize that valuable spiritual time available to sit at Jesus' feet. Let's not neglect or waste that. Let's put first what needs to be done for our own spiritual health and well being. Let's put away distractions and learn from Jesus. These are valuable lessons from hospitality.

*Italicized parts are quoted from Kristin Berkey-Abbott, "Sunday's Coming: Putting ourselves in Martha, Mary, and Jesus' shoes," *The Christian Century*, emailed newsletter, July 15, 2019.