

July 22, 2007
Luke 10:38-42
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

The past three weeks our family has had the opportunity to host a young woman, Sophie, from France. It's been a delightful visit. We couldn't have asked for a better guest. On Friday, our daughter Karin returned to France with Sophie to spend three weeks there. Karin and Sophie set up this exchange through Karin's English teacher, who has spent time in France near Sophie's village.

Having a guest in your home for three weeks gives you plenty of time to practice and reflect on hospitality. Karin cleaned out her room and gave it to Sophie so that she could have a private space. Sophie arrived with gifts from her family and we've sent gifts back. Together, we've traveled – to Acadia National Park, Portland Head Light, the Freedom Trail in Boston – to name a few, to help Sophie learn more about where we live. We've exposed her to New England seafood, including a real seaweed and burlap clambake on the shore in Washington County. She grimaced at the clams, which I found amusing since she likes escargot.

We've had months to plan and prepare for Sophie's visit. Although she was a stranger to us initially, by the time she arrived, we had corresponded enough to know some things about each other.

In today's story from Genesis, Abraham & Sarah welcome three visitors, whom they have not anticipated. And yet they give them an exuberant welcome. The story says that Abraham **ran** from the tent, **bowed** to the visitors, then **hastened** to Sarah and asked to her to make cakes ready **quickly**.

Then Abraham **ran** to the herd and selected a calf, which the servant **hastened** to prepare.

This is such a dramatically different response from our modern day reaction to strangers at the door. We teach our children, if they are home alone, never to open the door. We caution older adults to be watchful for scam artists. Sometimes we don't even bother to go to the door, especially if we suspect the strangers are solicitors of a secular or religious variety.

Abraham & Sarah could not have imagined responding in such a manner. In the hardscrabble, nomadic life to which they were accustomed, it was your cultural and moral obligation to welcome, feed, and even protect the stranger. At least as long as they were at your tent site.

Knowing this story of Abraham and Sarah helps set the cultural background for Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha. In their context, these women of Bethany would be expected to roll out the red carpet, so to speak. But, as is so often true, Jesus challenges the expectations, turning things upside down and inside out.

However, before we consider the story itself further, let's look at its placement in the gospel of Luke. Although the story can stand on its own, its impact deepens when we realize the gospel writer has placed it in response to a dialogue involving Jesus. In some respects this story begins back in verses 25-28, when a lawyer and Jesus have a dialogue about what must be done to

inherit eternal life. They agree that the law says you must love God and love neighbor. Sounds simple. But we know, Jesus knew, and the writer of Luke knew that putting flesh on this kind of love is challenging. So, the writer of Luke immediately follows this dialogue with two very challenging stories – The Good Samaritan, and Mary & Martha – one about loving neighbor and one about loving God.

Last week we looked at how the Good Samaritan story is a reflection on what it means to love neighbor. In that story, Jesus shocks his Jewish listeners by challenging their understanding of neighbor. He tells a story depicting a priest and a Levite as callous and instead lifting up a ‘dirty’ Samaritan as the ‘good guy.’ Remember there was deep enmity between Jews and Samaritans and yet Jesus says that the one who acts with mercy, even a Samaritan, is the one who is truly being neighbor. Jesus got his listeners attention. And most of them didn’t like it.

Now, with a one-two punch, Luke follows the Good Samaritan story with the story of Mary and Martha - a story about the complexity of loving God, and here again Jesus upsets the expectation about who is being “good.”

This is a fascinating story in our own cultural context. Set a group of women loose on this story and all our cultural struggles quickly come to the surface.

- Tensions between stay-at-home moms and those who are employed outside the home.
- Tensions in the church between older woman, who in the past made so many things happen in the church through women’s groups, and younger women who generally do not want to participate in those activities, often because they are involved in other responsibilities at church or they are too busy with work and everything else.

- Tensions between women who like to cook and those who would rather curl up with a book any day.

Whenever I have been with a group of women discussing this story, I could feel the tension rise in the room, because the story touches on our cultural messages about what a ‘good woman’ should do and be. It was this very tension that gave power to the story in its day as well.

For a moment let’s consider the characters Mary and Martha. As we read the story today, we tend to impose our cultural prejudice that since Martha was in the kitchen she must have been the quiet, behind the scenes, sister; and that Mary was the ‘out there’ sister, in her boldness to sit at Jesus’ feet, since sitting at the teacher’s feet is a sign of a disciple.

However, when you also consider the story of Mary and Martha from the Gospel of John (11) you realize that Martha was a woman to be reckoned with. In John’s gospel, in the midst of grief, while Mary stays home, Martha goes out to meet Jesus, challenges him, engages him in theological dialogue, and then professes that he is the Messiah. In both stories, in Luke and John, we see that Martha tends to be active and Mary tends to be contemplative.

Ironically, in today’s story, Martha is doing just what the Good Samaritan story commands. She is “going and doing,” providing for the neighbor in need (Jesus and his disciples) who have shown up at her door. So, by her cultural standards, Martha is acting as “the good woman.” However, in the process, as sometimes happens when you are going and doing, Martha becomes distracted and anxious, feeling overburdened by the task at hand. She gets ugly. Do you suppose she first asked Mary for help and Mary refused? Or, did Martha go directly to Jesus and complain? “Jesus, tell my sister to help.”

Of course, nothing in the story addresses some of our present day sensibilities. Don't you sometimes wish Jesus had said, "Come on guys, Martha needs help in the kitchen. Let's pitch in;" or, "Don't worry about it, we can just order out pizza."

However, listening to Jesus' response, it strikes me that he knew Martha very well. Well enough to challenge her. He is not speaking to a stranger. He is speaking to a disciple, one with whom he has had theological conversations. He knows Martha well enough to remind her that the spiritual journey is not just a matter of 'going and doing' but also requires times of 'sitting and listening,' of "being still and knowing that God is," as the Psalmist says. Food is necessary for the body, but the soul must be fed as well.

Jesus is so unpredictable. You never know who Jesus is going to lift up as an example. He violates cultural expectations, over and over again. In last week's story, he called a Samaritan 'good.' And now he is saying that Mary, the quiet one,

- who is audacious enough to sit at his feet, which women weren't supposed to do,
- and who is ignoring all the obligations to provide gracious hospitality, which women were supposed to do,

this Mary, in this moment, is loving God. She is providing a different kind of hospitality. She is opening not only her home, but also her heart and mind to ponder the ways of the holy.

Jesus' comments to Martha are not a general dismissal of homemaking and hospitality, for they are essential to our life together. He is speaking to a particular person at a particular moment regarding a particular spiritual challenge.

Mary's example is not only a challenge to Martha; it is a crucial challenge and counter balance to us as well. I have realized in

looking back over our three weeks with Sophie (our friend from France) that what I appreciated most about her visit was not the going and doing, but the times we sat and listened to one another - the times when we got to know her as a person and to learn more about her day-to-day life in France. Theologically, I would say it was when we allowed space and time for the movement of the Spirit of God among us.

One time when I asked a group of Church School teachers which commandment is the hardest to follow, they quickly agreed that "keeping the Sabbath," was the hardest. It's ironic, isn't it, since at the heart of Sabbath is the call to rest. These teachers acknowledged that except for Sunday morning worship (which they sometimes didn't get to), the day had become just another day to catch up on chores, do the grocery shopping, go to soccer tournaments, and generally keep up their pace of "being anxious and troubled about many things."

This story of Mary and Martha is a particular challenge to those of us caught in all the activity of raising children and pursuing careers. There is just too much going on, too much of the time. But, this story is also a challenge to those who later in life find themselves in the role of primary caregiver for an ailing family member. It is sometimes hard to even get your head above water. In fact, some of these folk may find it difficult to join us at worship. Yet, Jesus calls us to sit and be still, to allow our souls to be renewed. This story is also a caution to those who are moving at full speed, hurrying to enjoy all of life's toys and treasures. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

How crucial it is to be able to sit at the Teacher's feet and listen, to be still and know! So, if we said to Jesus, "We've heard both stories. So, shall we 'go and do', or 'sit and listen'?" I suspect his answer would be, "Yes."