

Pentecost 9C, Proper 11. July 17, 2016. Genesis 18 and Luke 10:38-42.

In my pride, I rather hope that you noticed that I've been gone for two weeks. I was on pilgrimage with some of our youth and two other adult leaders to Iona. Iona is an island off the coast of Scotland that basically has ten farmers, five artist shops, a grocery store, and an abandoned and then re-inhabited monastery, or abbey. It has a reputation as a "thin place," a place where the space between the physical and spiritual, if such a distinction is possible at all, is very thin and things bleed through. A community stays in the rebuilt abbey all the time and makes it their business to welcome pilgrims who want to come across half the world to try to have some kind of experience with God or themselves or both.

The community is shaped by a phrase that we heard often while we were there. They say that it's an old Celtic saying: Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise. This saying shapes the community's core value of hospitality. The saying probably started from experiences and legends where crazy monks out there on the cusp of the whole world welcomed strangers and pilgrims, only to find that the wanderer was, every now and then, Christ himself. But the deep meaning of the saying isn't that if we welcome enough strangers, we may eventually find one who is Jesus. No, the deep meaning of the saying is finally that when we welcome the stranger—every single time—we are welcoming Jesus Christ himself.

This conviction isn't unique to holy weirdos who give their life away for several years to serve God in a Christian hippie commune. It is an outgrowth of one of the very few themes in the Bible that is almost unequivocal. On most topics, you can draft some part of the Bible into your service regardless of which side you're on with some integrity. On war: the Bible can be used to argue that any warfare undertaken by a pious person is justified; and it can be used to argue that all human violence is sin and arises from a deficit of faith. On sex and gender: you can use the Bible to enforce rigorous subordination of women to men in all aspects of life; and you can use it to undermine all assignation of roles and identities based on sex. This multi-vocal character of the Bible is largely because the Bible isn't really so much a step-by-step guide to life as it is a collection of resources for us to use to forge our own authentic, faithful relationship with the living God.

But one of the few issues on which the Bible very nearly speaks with one voice is a key theme in today's readings: hospitality. Off the top of my head, I can only think of one biblical exception to the general rule that welcoming and privileging the stranger is a sacred duty and gift given to all who wish to be friends of God.¹ In today's readings from Genesis and Luke, we get two examples of people who open their doors and find that God has walked in. Taken together, these stories give us a picture of how to succeed or fail in giving true hospitality, and a notice of what kind of adventures we're opening ourselves up to when we open our doors.

We will begin with Mary and Martha, and their lesson on what is really the heart of hospitality. It's impossible not to be a little ambivalent about this text. Martha seems to get criticized by Jesus for doing what needs to be done, while the contemplative loafer, Mary, gets high praise. The story might, though, take on a different tone for us when we

¹ The Second Letter of John enjoins inhospitality to the antichrist, known by his rejection of the Incarnation.

realize that Mary has claimed for herself a place that society would deny her: sitting at Jesus' feet is the place of a disciple, a place that should only be open to males. And Martha asks Jesus to enforce the accepted gender norms by casting Mary out of this privileged, male place. Mary sees that Jesus changes everything, and Martha is left carrying the bucket of social norms and expectations that the Christ has just rendered obsolete.

But Martha's real failure isn't to be less feminist than Jesus is. It is to be so caught up in the trappings of hospitality that she fails to honor the heart of hospitality. Sure, it's a good idea to clean the house and prepare a meal when folks are coming over. But the point is to honor the guest, and Martha has let the tasks of hosting distract her so much from her guest that she actually asks him to intervene in a family quarrel—which is obviously bad form. We've all been to these dinner parties, where preparing the meal ends up being so intensive and so important that we're left sitting in a room by ourselves for an hour, waiting to be served, when what we'd really like is just to hang out with the friend who is cooking. Or, even worse, the dinner party where a family fight breaks out and, horror of horrors, we're asked to pick a side.

In the context of hospitality, Mary's better part is not being contemplative, as opposed to being active in the hurt of the world. It is remaining focused on the very person of the guest, to the point that she is willing to cross boundaries and defy expectations. And in turn, Martha's failure is not that she isn't pious enough or that she is too active—it is that she completely loses sight of the point of having someone over, which is to care for and be with the person who is there. The heart of hospitality is not having a program and team in place—it is a spirit of paying attention to and caring for the other. It is a way of being that is fundamentally open to the stranger and guest.

And when we live in a spirit of hospitality, of being open in our very selves to the stranger, amazing things just might happen. Abraham and Sarah are helped by having servants to do the work that Martha was stuck doing, but whatever their privileged situation, they put it to work for the sake of welcoming these three strangers. And in return, they are given that most demanding and rewarding promise: a child, a people, an unfolding history that will change the world. When we welcome the stranger, we are given the possibility of the most terrifying and joyful promises possible, because that is what Christ always brings. In the end, every stranger Christ brings with him the promise that life will continue, that love, the driving force of life, will triumph.

And that is why hospitality matters in this week, this month, this summer of hatred, fear, and grief. Fear would have us shut our doors, put up walls, banish the stranger. Cling to what we have and who we are and resist all approaches that may change us. This is never an option for Christians, because in every stranger we are to see Christ coming to us, bringing us gifts that will change us and the world, gifts that will finally be what makes life continue. We are to adopt a fundamental way of being that is open to the stranger, that is focused on the well-being and joy and company of the stranger, and not to be distracted from that call by the many tasks no one sets for us but ourselves. These are dark times, which makes it all the more important that we stand with our doors open and the food ready, our attention fixed on whoever is coming. Because often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.