

A sermon delivered by Sister Carol Ann Spencer, O.P., at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 18, 2010, and dedicated to all who struggle to balance the both/and of prayer and action.

“Models of Hospitality”

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

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

How do visitors feel when they visit this congregation for the first time? Before you answer that, think of a time when you visited another church or some other gathering where you were a stranger. Did anyone notice you? Welcome you? Make you feel at home?

I am afraid that often our experience is one of indifference. That should not be the case in the house of God and it was certainly not my experience this morning. Your pastors, Tim and Janine, along with many of you have made me feel very welcomed and I thank you for that.

Today’s passage from genesis teaches us that a primary value for God is the hospitable attitude of the chosen people toward others who are not one of them. This is not an isolated story, but one of many illustrations throughout scripture of a characteristic value God requires of the chosen people.

We find hospitality referred to frequently in the law. Abraham is sitting in the heat of the day at the entrance of his tent, hoping to feel a gentle breeze to soften the heart of the desert sun. Three strangers appear and immediately Abraham welcomes them and prepares a meal

for them so they can be refreshed. This is partly the behavior of Bedouins who know the importance of hospitality in the middle of a long journey across the wilderness and it is also the natural reaction of a man who is aware of the graciousness and hospitality of his god, and Abraham's need to reflect that spirit in his own life. He has learned to treat others the way he would have others treat him, and so within minutes, bread is baking and the fatted calf is being roasted.

The strangers are soon refreshed and strengthened for their journey. Then the surprise! These strangers bring the word of God to their host and hostess. One of the strangers tells Abraham that this time next year when they pass by, Sarah will have a son. We can't help but wonder what would have happened if Abraham would have given them the cold shoulder or been indifferent to their needs and simply pointed them toward Sodom. Centuries later, the writer of Hebrews put it this way: "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertain angels." (Hebrews 13:2)

When has the lord come to us in the presence of strangers, sojourners and visitors? Did we go out of our way to welcome them? Did God speak to us through them or did we miss it because we were preoccupied with our own concerns. Modern hospitality often poses as a matter of manners rather than morals. Biblical hospitality involves openness to all who pass by our tent, especially those in want.

How do we receive those who arrive "hungry" at many levels: for comfort, peace, friendship? How high are the walls around our privacy, nuclear family, or personal plans for the day? God is always in the now moment. There is no past or future to God so if you and I are going to encounter the lord it is in the ordinary everyday moments of our life. God's

Word comes to us daily and we often miss it because we are not aware. We don't see the God of many disguises. This Sunday's gospel reading is also about the virtue of hospitality. The story of Martha and Mary is all about what it means to invite and welcome Jesus into our lives. It is not the case that Martha's genuine concern about the details of hospitality does not have its place; however, it appears that Martha is so caught up in all of the activity that she misses the person—the person of Jesus. It is Mary who recognizes that the most essential part of hospitality is attentiveness to the person. Mary is attentive to Christ and listens to his words. She sits at the feet of Jesus – she assumes the role of a disciple, a learner

One day, the fullness of life and truth, came walking into the living room of a pair of sisters named Martha and Mary. They immediately recognized the privilege of having Jesus in their home and set to work fulfilling the sacred duty of hospitality. The problem was, they had conflicting ideas of what that duty entailed. Martha's response is very recognizable, especially by those familiar with Mediterranean culture. Mary thought that the supreme compliment that she could pay to her divine guest, even more than world-class refreshments, was to give him her full attention.

Martha's problem was that she allowed the activity of hospitality to become a distraction. She couldn't see the forest for the trees. She lost her focus and actually got mad that her sister would not join her in her frenetic fussing. Mary kept the focus. She was not passive for attentiveness to the fullness of truth is supremely active. That is why the contemplative life has always been held in the highest esteem by the mystical traditions.

Perhaps, the greatest sin of the modern world is its busyness. We live in the most distracted frenetic society of all time. The fullness of truth, the fullness of life, the fullness of grace, deserves our full attention. Jesus really

cannot be merely a part of one's life, but must be the center of one's life. It does not mean that our life can't be full of activities; however, unless we preserve some quiet time each day to sit at Jesus' feet as Mary did, our action will become a distraction and we'll be as snappy and unhappy as Martha.

For most of us, we probably see within ourselves a less delineated blend of active and contemplative sides of our nature. Today, the two sisters seem to call us to examine the ways in which we are at times Martha, and at other times Mary, and to ask how we are to live with both of these calls within us. We live in a very active society, in which activity and busyness are often equated with productivity and we hear that a productive life is a meaningful life.

The gospel today reminds us that it is always a both/and. It is about balance. We need both contemplation and action. We need to pray and to contemplate and then give to others the fruits of our contemplation.

So, our scripture readings today have challenged us to look at several models of hospitality. Theologically speaking, hospitality is vital, not because of the food and how much there is, but more importantly, to relearn that a little unleavened bread and cup of wine will do in most cases because what truly brings us together is the word of God.

The purpose of hospitality is to prepare a welcoming space for encounters with God's word and to acknowledge the presence of Christ in our lives and to be attentive to that presence. It is something to keep in mind when entertaining those angels unawares.

It is also a reminder that no matter how much time we give to compassionate action, every person also needs to set aside some time for prayer and contemplation so that our action flows from our prayer and our prayer directs our action. It is a both/and. We need both Mary and Martha.

Let us bow our heads and ask for God's blessing: May our God, the ultimate host, bless us with the gift of hospitality – the gift of welcoming the stranger in our midst. May our compassion grow as we listen and ponder God's word so that all of our actions may be the "active work" of the living God. Amen.

Copyright 2010, First Congregational Church, UCC