

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
Matt Phillips
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
July 21, 2019

One of the activities I have found myself enjoying more and moreover the last few years has been cooking. And my favorite part of cooking has become not the combining of different ingredients to form something wholly new, and not getting to taste the fruits of my labor, (though that is a plus) but my favorite part of cooking has become seeing that whoever I've cooked for — whoever my guest happens to be — enjoys the meal I've prepared for them.

Maybe you can relate. Perhaps you too enjoy providing hospitality: entertaining family, friends, and other distinguished guests, making them feel comfortable, and providing them with a delicious meal. Admittedly, most of the recipients and appreciators of my cooking to-date have been my wife and friends (and members of Instagram) but every so often I'll get the opportunity to cook for a guest who is special to me and this opportunity to be hospitable brings me great excitement. And, as you might expect, the more distinguished the guest, the greater my excitement and the more likely I am to frantically fuss over every minute aspect of the meal's preparation in order for it to be "just perfect..." and for that reason I can understand where Martha was coming from in today's reading from Luke's Gospel.

Now I've had some guests that were pretty special to me — and I'm sure you have as well — but as far as important guests go, I can't imagine who I would be more excited and more anxious to provide hospitality to than Jesus. I can understand Martha's excitement. I can understand Martha's anxiety. And, when faced with that excitement and that anxiety over all the intricate details of her hospitality, I can certainly understand Martha's frustration when she sees her sister, Mary sitting and listening while leaving Martha behind the scenes to do all the grunt work... unaware that Mary is not avoiding her hospitable responsibilities but is rather fulfilling the whole other half to hospitality that Martha understandably — in all her excitement — seems to have forgotten. Martha had her guest's physical needs covered, (satisfying their hunger and quenching their thirst) but Mary also welcomes Jesus as a guest by being present with him, being attentive to him and listening to what he has to say. Each woman compliments the other's work (with a little help from Jesus) to show us what proper hospitality looks like. We receive another example of hospitality in today's reading from Genesis.

We read that as Abraham sat at the entrance of his tent, three strangers arrived. Now in the ancient Near East, strangers appearing at your home or encampment was not always welcomed news. In a land where one's neighbors were few and far between and where the wilderness was filled with just as many innocent and weary travelers as bands of violent marauders, welcoming a stranger was a bit of risky business. Yet rather than turning these three strangers away, Abraham immediately welcomes them and begins showing his grand hospitality (like Martha) with a feast and (like Mary) with his attentiveness to and presence with his guests. Abraham offers this welcome, this hospitality with the understanding that as he welcomes these strangers, he welcomes God.

Tradition has offered different interpretations as to just how these three strangers turned out to be God in Abraham's midst. Eastern Orthodoxy maintains that these strangers were the persons of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Others have claimed that one of these strangers was a manifestation of God while the other two were ordinary human beings. Others still believe these three strangers were angelic visitors. Although, along with Abraham, we as Christians know that even if all three had been human beings, God still was among those visitors. We know that when Jesus says "Just as you do to the least of these... you do to me" (Matthew 25:40) that he resides in all people, that God resides in all people.

Like Abraham welcoming three strangers, or Mary and Martha welcoming Jesus, each opportunity we are given to welcome a guest into our spaces is an opportunity to welcome God with loving hospitality: whether they are a new face here this morning, a neighbor seeking help at your door, or even strangers seeking refuge here in Milwaukee or at the nation's border. And when we welcome a guest into our spaces, we absolutely fill their immediate needs, (satisfy their hunger, quench their thirst) but we also need to be present with our guests, engaging with and listening to them, lest we remain ignorant of their less obvious needs: their human needs, their relational needs... and lest we miss whatever message God is speaking to us through them, like news of a child for Abraham or the words that Jesus spoke to Mary.

Feeding people is important and necessary. Sheltering people is important and necessary. And being present with and speaking with and listening to people are equally important and necessary. So the next time any of us are presented with a visitor, (whether here in this space, in your homes or out in the world) I pray that Christ will help us to see his own face in them that we might welcome them as guests with the loving hospitality of Abraham and both Mary and Martha, feeding their bodies and souls. Amen.