

Mary And Martha – Tori Gocey

Genesis 18:1-10a; Psalm 15; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Good morning! I want us today to look at two stories: one from Luke, the other from Genesis.

We are presented with two similar, but a little different, stories of how to be hospitable to guests in our home. In both of these stories they had the same guests, but it was the attitude of the hosts that I noticed to be different.

When you hear the word hospitality, what do you think of? Maybe you think of opening your table for Sunday lunch with friends, inviting the youth group to hang out in your basement once a month, or maybe you even think of letting a homeless person stay on your couch because he or she is cold. We could probably come up with many definitions for hospitality, but do we ever think of our personal attitudes during our hospitable acts? How do you feel when you eat a delicious meal with your friends and family? Where is your tolerance level when the youth group is up past midnight playing loud music? What are your intentions when you let a stranger you've never met before sleep on your couch? Maybe you're looking for recognition from your peers. Or you're wanting to check off your good deeds box to show God that you are at the top of your spiritual game.

When reading our passages for today I wasn't questioning whether or not I myself was being hospitable, but instead was questioning my own posture and attitude in the midst of my hospitable acts. I kept coming across this idea of presenting hospitality with an attitude of gratitude. This vision of gracious hospitality, to me, looks like hospitality that puts God at the front and center, while leaving our own agendas to the side. It allows space for our hearts to align with God's vision for the kingdom. With many people of age, race, and culture come many ways of displaying this gracious hospitality, and will look different for everyone. Because of this idea, the posture we present to others can make God's intention for our servanthood known to creation. In today's readings we find gracious hospitality appear in many forms; we'll see it in a humble bow, in meal preparation, and even in the silence of opening one's ears to listen. We'll take a look at God's encounters with Mary and Martha as well as Abraham and Sarah, all being very willing to open their homes and engage with the Lord. We'll learn today that these two different postures of hospitality can help us identify what our own hearts should look like when bringing guests into our home. Both ways are hard to master, both take time, but both are right.

In Luke we have Jesus entering the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha. We aren't told the specific strengths and weaknesses of both women, but from here we know Mary as someone who is eager to listen and Martha who is more eager to get things done in a timely fashion. Martha welcomes Jesus into their home and instantly goes to work, trying to make sure everything looks good, smells good, and tastes good. Meanwhile Mary is just lying at Jesus's feet holding on to every word, listening as intensely as she can. This in turn angers her sister, Martha, so she immediately runs over to Jesus, scolding him, practically demanding him to do something about her sister's laziness. (Who is Martha to tell Jesus what's right and wrong, anyway?) How then does Jesus respond to Martha's complaint? He does not ignore her, nor does he discount or misread her concerns. Rather, Jesus takes Martha seriously and addresses her directly with this beautiful combination of love and discipline. As someone who works directly with kids I can admit this discipline with love is extremely hard for me to master at times. So first, he addresses her—*Martha, Martha*—and says, *You are worried and distracted*

by many things (basically saying, “I love you, Martha, you know that. But come on now, do you hear yourself?”).

Second, Jesus pinpoints Martha’s shortcomings and rebukes her attitude, not her actions. The problem is not Martha’s commitment to service/ministry, because Martha’s choice of hospitality includes such things as greeting, anointing, housecleaning, food preparation, and table service, which are very commendable; her fussing and fuming over it are not. This worrying and fussiness is not something Jesus particularly finds very fruitful, especially when someone is yelling in his ear.

Third, Jesus defends Mary’s choice as *the good part* (NASB), not necessarily saying it’s the “better” part, and reminds Martha that, instead of having her mind filled with many things (like anxiety and anger), there is indeed only one thing, or feeling, that is needed here. This text is not so much a ‘put down’ of Martha, as it is a gentle rebuke for her anxiety and bitterness. Jesus is affirming Martha’s multiple acts of service. I believe Jesus understands Martha’s heart and that she has been very attentive to Jesus physically since the minute he walked up to their door (despite what the story looks like at first glance—because initially it looks like Jesus walks into a room and only 50% of the crowd actually pays attention to him). In reality, from this tiny story in Luke we see that Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, knew who he was, and was ready to go to work for him. Jesus knew her intentions were pure. It was just her inner perfectionist and bitter mind that ended up taking up most of her headspace in the end. While Martha is having this inner battle with her sister and her anxiety, Jesus is also indirectly asking for Martha to appreciate the simplicity of her sister Mary’s mind. Jesus is hoping Martha sees Mary’s incredibly submissive and humble posture as one that is more suitable for this visit.

Now Abraham and Sarah have a similar, if a little different, approach to hospitality with the Lord. The first thing we may wonder when reading this passage is why Abraham is so eager to see these strangers in the first place. He is sitting under a tree, hot (it is *in the heat of the day*, verse 1), and likely pondering how it will be possible for Sarah and him to have a child, as God has just rather ridiculously promised in the previous chapter. Abraham, what a guy! At 99 years old he sees the three figures—which we can interpret, based on Abraham’s addressing him as Lord, that either God is one of them, or this could be some sort of Trinitarian introduction. Either way Abraham immediately runs over to them. (Oh, and running at 99 *in the heat of the day*? I don’t even like to run and I’m 24.) Then, to top it off, he bows down before them—instantly gets down on the ground, hands and knees, and admires what he sees and who he was with. Abraham says, “My Lord, don’t pass me by. Instead, come inside and let me take care of all your needs. You can rest, you can eat and drink, all the good stuff.”

Abraham and Sarah received these strangers into their home and they all sat and ate together. They ate not just the normal food but they prepared a feast.

Only the best they had for their special guests! Some may look at this story and think that God only does good and amazing things for us (like give us a baby at 100) if we are hospitable and make the best dinner possible for people. Obviously that’s unrealistic, and poor theology. Sarah and Abraham invited the Lord into their home because as people who proclaimed their love and trust for God it is was their responsibility to be in relationship with him every day. Abraham and Sarah were coming from a conversation where they were promised a child at 100 years old. Wow, what a relationship they had with God! With the Lord bringing that kind of good and crazy news you better believe they wanted to have him over for dinner.

While we know the ending to this story through the rest of Abraham's lineage, we don't quite know what happens after Jesus talks with Martha and Mary in their home. You know I would have LOVED to witness the ending to their home visit story. A few things I thought could've happened: does Martha simply obey Jesus and immediately fall to the floor to listen (while Mary has that smirk on her face, letting her sister know she was wrong)? Or does Jesus just drop the words of wisdom, take off, and leave Mary and Martha there to have a theological debate about who actually was right and wrong in this situation?

I have two sisters; we're pretty close in age, so of course there was some healthy sibling rivalry between us. We're pretty similar to Mary and Martha here in this case, with each of us possessing different levels of the listener and the doer.

I remember one year for Mother's Day my dad got us three girls together and said, "Ok, I think we should all do something nice for Mom for Mother's Day." We were probably 9 and 10 at the time. Now, when you're 7 and 9 there's not much buying flowers and chocolates, so you have to do some manual labor as your gift. We brainstormed and eventually decided we were going to clean the entire house for Mom before she got home that day. So we're cleaning and scrubbing everything. Then all of a sudden my sister says, "Ok, I think I'm going to write Mom a card with all the things I love about her instead of cleaning." When you're cleaning and actually doing stuff it's pretty tiring, so of course I'm furious when one of the helpers just dips out and leaves to do a little "writing." So she's writing her dumb card and I'm dusting and picking up my toys and everything... In walks my mom. And I'm waiting for her to recognize how clean everything is and how perfect the house looks. I'm waiting for my thank-you hug and maybe even a few tears—working all day long, making everything look as perfect as I can get it. Instantly she's greeted by my sister who hands her the card, smiling, "Happy Mother's Day!" Meanwhile I'm just waiting there, tired and dirty, waiting for my recognition. Didn't happen. My mom read my sister's card, got her all teary eyed and stole my hug. I was so mad I began yelling at my mother and my sister (probably similar to how Martha scolded Jesus) and I ran upstairs without telling my mom, "Happy Mother's Day."

As I reflect on that story now, almost 20 years later, I'm realizing that Mother's Day was not about my 10-year-old self. Weird, I know. It was not about how clean I could get the house to look, or how big of a reaction I could get from my mom. It was about my mom. It was about honoring her and loving her with my actions because she actually does love me, despite what I thought when I was 10 (and probably still loved me after I threw a selfish tantrum on Mother's Day). It was about thinking of her first before I thought of anything or anyone else. I wasn't supposed to clean the house because I was going to get the biggest hug from her; I didn't receive any kind of hug that day, I was so bad. I was supposed to clean the house because it was for her. It was my awesome mom that I loved.

I don't think this story in Luke was made for us to know what happens at the end. Same in our Genesis text with Abraham and Sarah. Even though we know what happens in the end with Abraham's family dynamic, our text today is only that first section. I think there is something to be learned in not knowing the ending right away. In Luke we are left with a sort of cliff hanger with Jesus dropping the mike, so to speak, in front of Martha. I think we are meant to look at these passages and say, "Okay, what does living a life of gracious hospitality look like? And what kind of posture am I presenting when I'm bringing people into my space? Am I more similar to Martha, a doer, someone who knows what needs to get done in order for people to be fully served? Or am I more like Mary, someone who is not afraid to physically sit before the

Lord and listen to what he is saying in my life?” Or, “Am I similar to Abraham and Sarah, who are eager to rush right over to strangers and beg them to come eat with them?” None of these choices are wrong, as Jesus points out, but all three are presenting us different attitudes in their ways of being hospitable to God.

Since I’ve been married (it’ll be one month tomorrow!), I’ve felt myself telling my spirit that there’s only room for one person, my husband. People warned me of the emotional high you experience in the beginning of your marriage: people congratulate you and send you gifts and you get to come home every night and be in love and it’s wonderful. However, I haven’t been allowing myself to create space for others to come to my table. I haven’t been attentive to God’s truth, not only about who all I should be serving, but with what posture I should do it. And when I do invite people in, cynically it’s to show them OUR new apartment or to look at how fun married life is. I’ve been guilty of limiting my length of hospitality towards certain friends, family, strangers, and even our God. Rarely am I like Mary or Abraham, on my knees listening, bowing before the Lord, in admiration, in silence, in tears. So I would say I’ve been a distracted Martha—someone whose intentions are pure, but gets distracted so easily by how things should be that I forget the purpose of my relationship with God and others. I have definitely felt convicted of the way I’ve been hospitable not just to my neighbor, but to the Lord. I’ve quickly recognized that when we deny having an attitude of gracious hospitality towards God and others, our relationship with God is hindered. Even if God is not promising us crazy things like a baby at 100 years old, God gave us this beautiful freedom through his son so that we may open our homes and our hearts to his people with a gracious heart. And I have failed him.

Luckily God says to me, similar to what Martha heard, “Tori, I love you, but do you see yourself right now?” We learn many things on our road to gracious hospitality and can improve daily, even when we’re 100. While we may be Martha by nature, it’s important to realize that we can become a Mary, and at some point in our lives, we might be acting as both! We should do both. Thankfully the Holy Spirit provides strength and prepares the hearts of those who are wanting to be both. So what does your life look like presenting your attitude of gratitude? Can you bring people into your space graciously? Have you given both Mary and Martha a chance in your life? I encourage you to enjoy time spent with the Lord and others rather than ‘doing for doing’s sake’. Let’s let people into our homes and let the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with Christ’s peace and mercy. Let’s create that space together as we are continually being shaped by our Lord’s invitation to feed others and to be fed by others. Amen.