

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
17 July 2016

Scripture readings:

Amos 8:1-12 Psalm 52 Colossians 1:15-28 Luke 10:38-42

A woman in my first parish used to back me into corners until midnight and babble Spanish at me which I didn't comprehend. Her name was Marta and she always referred to this passage of scripture and sometimes would say to me and herself, "*Marta, Marta, que afanada esta!*" *Martha, Martha, how busy you are!*

I think Martha gets a bad rap. First of all, she's the one who invites Jesus in the first place. "*Won't you come to the house and visit me and my sister?*" Then the work needs to be done. It seems to me the only way you really honor a guest is by being prepared or preparing something. You honor a guest by scrubbing the toilet, baking, cooking, making food, dusting, vacuuming, ironing the tablecloth, polishing the silver, getting out the china. None of that stuff does itself by itself, does it. It needs to be done.

When James would prepare a meal which he did beautifully and often, he never said "*No*" when I, as Martha, went home and said, "*Shouldn't we invite so-and-so?*" The answer was always yes. And there were always those who, when the invitation came, said yes. Entertaining is a wonderful and beautiful and glorious thing, but it was always understood that whoever prepared the food didn't have to do the cleanup.

I was at dinner with the Pettinatos this week and when it was time to clean up, they said, "*Oh, we're ahead of the game. The dishwasher is empty.*" You know about that - having a full dishwasher and other things to go in it.

I think we can identify with Martha very easily, most of us white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant work ethic kind of people. We do our bit and are proud of it. But I think that may not be the real issue here in this piece of history. I think what we're talking about in this gospel is not who does the work and who sits and listens, not who's the student and who's the doer. One thing we do know about Martha, by the way, is she wasn't a Lutheran. Lutherans understand that no amount of good hard work will save you. So Martha was some other kind of Christian but not a Lutheran. She thought her work might be good for somebody, and her sister and Jesus sort of took advantage of her work. They probably ate the strawberry-rhubarb pie she baked, and they drank the tea which was imported from Turkey probably. They were glad for the refreshment, but that's not the point. The point is in doing the work in the kitchen, it seems to me, that Martha was denied what Mary had which was the feast of an interchange with Jesus. Martha denied herself a contact with God. Martha got involved in all of the kinds of other stuff that bothers us, and let me say I think rightly so at times. But the result was the same, nevertheless. Until she put down the wooden spoon, turned off the oven and went to sit at Jesus' feet she wasn't going to get anything more than she had and what she would have been left with was all that she had to give, which was a pretty nice beautifully iced cake. But there was something more to be had, and that was to be had in a contact, interchange, conversation with Jesus.

Now you may know that the Episcopal Church sometimes makes things more difficult than they need to be. I can say that...and you can fire me! [*laughter*] Currently we're at this point where there's a Track 1 and a Track 2 in terms of the readings you choose. When I'm asked questions about that, I just say, "*Oh, pick one.*" Well, the other lesson that would have been read today instead of the lesson from Amos was a text in the 18th chapter of Genesis which is about what is called in Eastern Orthodox iconography the Old Testament trinity. It's when Abraham encounters three strangers underneath the oaks at Mamre. Three foreigners perhaps, three people he certainly didn't know and didn't know anything about, show up. But he wants them to stick around. He wants to spend time with them. He wants to know who these strangers are. So he calls Sarah, his wife, because women do these things, don't they. "*Get enough flour and make three loaves of bread for them.*" She didn't throw the rolling pin at him and tell him, "*Do it yourself. You can make bread.*" But in those days - certainly not in our day - the woman did those things. So Sarah went and baked bread. And then he asked for water. Now they're in a hot, dry place and the water wasn't to drink. It was to wash their feet. How's that for wasteful? Of course you can't eat with dirty feet. "*I told you to wash your hands before you came to the table.*"

Well, in places where people don't wear shoes, maybe washing your feet ain't a bad idea either. And if bread and water weren't enough, there was an order to kill the fatted calf and prepare a feast and share it with these guys. The only good reason to have a banquet, it seems to me, is to feast on the company of others, using food as the excuse to get there.

If you ever spent time with frivolous things like her royal Britannic Majesty and a royal dine and sleep at Windsor Castle where they put hundreds of people at one table and all of the energy that is used to measure the distance between the plates and the cluster of glasses for water and wine and champagne and everything else and all of the hardware on either side of the plate to eat things right. In *Gosford Park* one of the visiting servants asked why there was a fork on both sides of the plate on this array of knives and spoons on one side and forks on the other side. At one point there was a fork on either side and the answer was, "*They eat their fish with two forks.*"

Back to Windsor Castle and royal arrangements for dinner. You've seen all this stuff on TV. There's this extraordinary effort with huge staffs of people to get things right. One of the things that's gotten right, there's a large leather maquette into which name cards of all of the people are slipped to decide who's going to sit where and next to whom so that the conversation, the things to talk about are possible. So despite all the china, all the crystal, all the candles, all the flowers, all the linens, all the hardware, that people might encounter each other reasonably, decently and learn from each other something and thereby have a good time as well as a meal, to have a feast of human connectedness in addition to some food and refreshment for the body.

So in the story in Genesis about Abraham encountering these three men under the oaks at Mamre, it's believed that those three men may have been understood to be an emanation of God being present. The iconographers in the Eastern Church as they paint these three guys sitting around a table, eventually they grow wings. They turn into angels with halos and all the rest of it. Isn't it interesting that all those thousands of years before Jesus there was an understanding that if you're going to encounter God, it wouldn't be an emanation in just one way, that God is complex enough to require more than one simple description. Why it's three I don't know, but three is better than two.

And so Abraham engages these strangers, foreigners. There is no indication in scripture that they were in his territory legally with green cards. They simply showed up uninvited, unknown, and more than one of them, and sat down because they were welcomed. And in making them welcome at his own expense and even greater expense of Sarah, I believe, who did all of the work, there was a relationship with strangers that provided for Abraham a promise.

By this time Sarah was an old bag. She was way beyond child-bearing years. She was post-menopausal and, for all we know, she may have had a pre-Christian hysterectomy. She could not have kids - *couldn't!* And after caring for these strangers, Abraham and Sarah came away with the hope and the promise that she would bear a child. Now you can take bag and post-menopausal and translate that into virgin if you want. Both words indicate pretty much sexless. "*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.*" [Isaiah 7:14] There is this promise from God that where things seem physiologically and otherwise hopeless, if the risk is taken of encountering God in others who are unexpected, foreign, not even welcomed but received politely and cared for as one would want to be cared for oneself and even better, the result of that encounter is promise and hope. And what is the promise? That Sarah, that old post-menopausal bag, will have a child! And thank you for laughing because the name of the child is *they will laugh*. His name is Yitzhak which in Hebrew means *they will laugh* because it's absolutely laughable! But it's a fulfilled promise, as we know. And it's a promise that came to them from strangers who after the encounter are believed to have been God present with them. It takes a while for them to grow wings because the belief comes after the encounter, after having seen, after having spoken, after having eaten, after having come to understand each other. This extraordinary promise of things thought not possible is given to them and unfolds in mystery. That wasn't in the bulletin today, but there is good stuff in the bulletin today related to this.

Mary and Martha have welcomed Jesus into their house. Now in the epistle lesson today we get a glimpse of what that might mean. Now the problem is Jesus knew Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus,

but he accepted the invitation anyway. In the epistle lesson we read, "*Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God.*" If we look at the text from Genesis of the Old Testament trinity, these three foreign gooks who show up in Abraham's front yard - the Church comes to believe that they, too, were the image of an invisible God. God was present because people were there. And when people began to realize that in their encounter with other people God was there, they start to paint them with wings and halos. The question is of us, brothers and sisters, when will the world start to paint us with wings and halos because we have received and entertained and exchanged with and fed and been fed by strangers who have come to our doorstep unexpectedly? When will the day come that because of that encounter we say, "*We have seen the living God in other people.*"

There is no indication in Genesis that those three guys were in any way religious. They just were there. They were there, they were hungry, they were fed, and the discussion occurred, the exchange of ideas, the willingness to come to know each other, and the willingness to leave eventually with a promise left behind.

Now the really, really spooky thing in the Amos text which was the first one today, is Amos is really scolding Israel. They're in hot water. Anybody else in hot water these days? These words don't have to be old. They can be very contemporary. But what's the threat? Sackcloth on your loins and baldness on every head. Well, we're halfway there. That sounds uncomfortable and not pretty. "*I will make it like mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.*" Israel has been naughty. It is possible for nations and religious nations to be naughty, vile, wrong, all the while arguing religious reasons for that. This is a Christian nation?

"*The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine not of bread, not of a thirst for water - and this is the most astounding concept - a famine, a hunger for the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, they shall run to and fro seeking the word of the Lord, but they won't find it.*" They will be left without hope. They will be left without promise.

When were Abraham and Sarah without hope and without promise? When were they bereft of this word from God which we call good word or good news? They were without hope and without promise before they entertained strangers, before they fed foreigners, before they connected with people in whom they eventually came to believe they saw God. And let it be said, the three guys under the oaks at Mamre also saw in Abraham and Sarah a future and a promise - "*For they shall be the father of a nation.*"

I brought a book with copies of the icon of the Old Testament trinity, the three men under the oaks at Mamre, which is also called in the Orthodox Church *the hospitality*. It's simply a depiction of three guys, sometimes with halos, sitting around a table, and guess what's on the table? Now remember this is pre-Christian. This is Genesis. This is the Orthodox understanding of that encounter between Abraham and God. On the table in front of the three guys is a cup, a plate and a piece of bread. And the bread is sometimes called the head of the lamb. In Orthodox churches not all of the loaf is used for communion. Just the center is cut out and that is called the lamb. The rest of the bread is divided into lumps and spread around all those who cannot take communion and often carried home to people at home. It's called *antidoron*.

The part that's used in the Orthodox communion, the center of that bread which is marked with a cross or special symbols is called the lamb. That's eventually crumbled up and dropped into the wine, and it makes a sort of holy soup in there, and the people receive their communion on a spoon with the wine-soaked bread.

In the Orthodox icon of the pre-Christian holy trinity, the Old Testament trinity, are signs of hospitality and the pre-figuring of the sacrament. So what's this all about? That when we gather here to celebrate mass, holy communion, the Lord's Supper, what we are doing is remembering culticly, religiously, liturgically in this act that we encounter God. In the Middle Ages they said, "*Yes, God is really there in the bread and God is really there in the wine.*" God becomes a thing.

I think we've grown a little bit beyond that in saying in this sacrament these things go into us and God becomes visible in our connectedness with each other in our communion, and as we see God present with us as we hear the word and the word takes on flesh and blood in us through our ears and our mouths and our guts and all the rest of it, God becomes not thing, but person. And that person of God continues to live in each and every last one of us, and that's what's trying to be got at in the lesson from Colossians, that Christ is the image of the invisible and the Body of Christ is God visible. Oh, Jesus is dead for two thousands years and we can't see him

anymore. No! We with St. Paul say that as we come together and share this meal we become the Body of Christ and God becomes visible in us. And maybe it becomes our job rather than to worry about who is showing up on our doorstep, for us to show up on the doorsteps of others and expect to see what it's like to be humble receivers of somebody else's hospitality and share with them the hope and promise that God gives us.

So much of our constructs politically, socially and otherwise continue to make us into Lady Bountiful. Our systems have instructed us as white, wealthy, powerful dispensers of good and leftovers. Aren't we nice when we're generous to others, and shouldn't they be grateful to us for being so nice to them.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof" and will we or will we not share what we have so generously received. And I'm not talking about money. Keep it in your pocket. I'm talking about the love of God which comes to us so fully and completely in our celebration and knowledge of the Lord in the gospel and in the sacrament. And shouldn't that change our lives as recipients who sit with useless Mary at the feet of Jesus listening and believing that the love of God for us is real and, therefore, just as real for everyone else in the world. It twists the daylight out of traditional religion. It should make us humble and grateful and willing to send the women into the kitchen to bake bread and get the slaves to kill the calf and to waste water on the feet of those we don't know because they can, do, have and, I assure you, friends, will bring the love and promise and hope of God Almighty to us just as much as we might feebly share it with anybody else we get around to doing it with when we feel like it. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.