

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

Sarah, Mary and Martha
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We live in a lonely world. My grandmother always cooked more than was needed to feed the family. Why? Because she never knew who would drop in or who her family might bring home for lunch or dinner. She did not want to be scurrying around at the last minute preparing more food and she wanted folk to know they were always welcome at her table. Also, she didn't want to miss out on the stories or gossip!

Things have changed. We don't have unexpected company much any more with emails, cell phones and all the modern communication devices. But, what do you do when unexpected company arrives? We may get a little warning and have our freezer stocked with extra food but how do you react? Are you Abraham, Sarah, Mary or Martha?

Our Scripture today tells the story of unexpected guests, gives us a glimpse of personalities regarding hospitality and maybe a lesson or two. (It is summer so I am going to play a little - stretch things with these two stories.) I see Abraham and Martha as like individuals, two of a kind. Both concerned with the proper hospitality. And, Sarah and Mary as two who wanted to hear the stories, enjoy their guests.

Abraham wants to be a good host to these unexpected visitors. He senses there is something different about them. Did you notice his actions in the story? He "hastens" or "hurries" to get Sarah baking the bread, it will be hot and fresh from the oven. He "rushes" to select the best calf from his herd and directs one of his servants to "rush" its preparation. Then he "hurriedly" gathers all of the other items necessary for a fine meal. He becomes the servant. He stands back and watches as they eat, indicating that he is keeping their plates and glasses full. He is being a gracious and perfect host.

Martha wants to be the perfect hostess. Jesus has arrived and she has the meal to prepare. The NRSV says she was, "*distracted by her many tasks.*" The NIV says that, "*she was distracted by all her preparations.*" And the Message says she, "*was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen.*" She wants things perfect for her guests. Like Abraham she is rushing about making sure that everything is ready. Both would make Emily Post proud. Nothing is neglected.

Now, let's turn to Sarah and Mary (as I said, I am pushing the story a little, but maybe not that far). Sarah has the bread to bake (perhaps she had a servant girl do it) but she wanted to know more about these guests. Now custom would not allow her to go out and be with them – the best she could do was to get as close as possible and listen from afar. She was curious about these strangers and what they were doing visiting Abraham. She would have done what Mary did if she could have. But, she did the only thing she could – she listened at the door of the tent.

Mary on the other hand finds a place at Jesus' feet. She does not stand behind a door or a wall. She is a part of the group. I see this as a quiet time for Jesus and the disciples. It is a time of rest at some point in the day. They are telling about the events of the day. They are listening to Jesus telling stories. This is a time to relax, share in events of the day, ask and answer questions. Mary listens, Martha fusses.

Because Mary listens Martha is upset. She has all this work to do. Mary should be helping her in the kitchen, not sitting with Jesus and the disciples. This is a time for the men. She comes with the request (or demand), "Master, tell Mary to get up and get in the kitchen and help me. I have more to do than one woman should have to do." Martha should not have to feed this group alone. She needs help and Mary is just sitting there doing nothing.

Jesus does not acquiesce to Martha's demand. He simply states that Martha is concerned about unimportant things. Mary has chosen what is better – being with people. He is not concerned with a perfect table setting, everything served perfectly and in order. People will not remember Martha's perfect lamb, but Jesus and the conversation, the stories. They will recall the fellowship, the laughter, the stories and the being together.

There is something in all of us that likes a good story, conversation. This is more and more a need in our world today. Facebook friend put an entry on his page on Friday about the heavy thunder showers

in the LA area on Thursday night. Storms so violent that it knocked the cable out and he and his son were forced to read a book! He commented on how he had forgotten how great it was to sit and read with his son. Mary has chosen the better thing, to be with people. She wanted to hear the stories, to be a part of the community. It gets lonely in the kitchen. Jesus is saying the people are more important than the externals. Relationships are more important than a perfectly set table. I would wonder about guests who are more concerned with how well the table is set over and above the conversation and people gathered around the table. It speaks more about them than they might believe. Jesus is concerned not about the setting of the table but about the relationships that develop among those seated around the table or in the living room, etc.

Look at the stories again. Abraham stands off to the side as his guests eat. He does not join them or take part in their conversation. He stands in the role of a servant. He wants to impress his guests and does not trust one of his servants to serve. These are important people and they must have the best he can give.

Sarah, however, wants to know more. She is more curious than Abraham. She gets as close as she can and listens to what they are talking about as they eat. She longs to hear their stories. The news they bring from the outside world. She, like Mary, wants to be a part of the community – she lived in an age when women were not part of the community at times like these. Maybe I am pushing the story a little here but I don't think so. Like Mary, Sarah wants to be a part – being a woman in those days was a lonely existence.

Mary and Sarah want to hear the stories, maybe tell their own stories. Abraham and Martha are concerned that the guests are properly cared for. That the food is served when it should be. That the glasses are kept full and that their guests have no wants. But Jesus says, people are more important than things.

Recall a plaque, “No matter where I serve my guests, they seem to like my kitchen best.” As I think about this I have reached a different conclusion than I used to have. It is not because the food is in the kitchen, it is because it is in the kitchen were the best stories are told. The fun and fellowship in preparation. The interaction that comes in the semi-relaxed situation of the kitchen. If I were designing a house the kitchen would be the largest room. It would be a welcoming place with plenty of counter space and seating. Why? Because this is where the best stories are told, where the fellowship is the warmest. “Too many cooks spoil the broth”—but they also have the best stories.

We live in a lonely world. There are lonely people longing for communication, fellowship—Sarah and Mary. A place where there is laughter. A place where stories are told. Mary and Sarah wanted to hear the stories. They wanted to be a part of the community. Abraham and Martha wanted to make certain the table was perfect, the food cooked just right, the plates and glasses full. Jesus urges us to not worry so much about perfection and the minor tasks but to think about the community, the people and the fellowship.

At the end of my report to the Deacon's on Friday I typed, “We need a party!” -- one of the Deacon's asked what I meant. I meant we need a party! A time to get together, catch up, enjoy each other's stories – no agenda, no program, no meeting with decisions to be made – just a party! So, we have tentatively scheduled one for Sunday, August 29th – not sure of details yet but we will work them out – A time for us to sit together and share. And, of course, enjoy some food! Or in Jesus' words:

“Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her” (10:42b NIV).

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989
Peterson, Eugene, The Message, Zondervan, 2004, 2006