

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C):  
**The Hospitality of Mary and Martha**

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Reflections on **Gn 18:1-10; Col. 1:24-28; Lk 10:38-42**



The Hospitality of Abraham

An Old Testament Trinity

In the Letter to the Hebrews there is a line that says: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unaware.*

**T**oday we have two stories about “entertaining angels – and even more than angels – unawares.” The first story comes out of the mists of ancient Jewish history.

Abraham, after all, is the forefather of the Jewish people, the one who first heard God calling him out of Mesopotamia into the part of the world we now call Palestine. From what we know of tribal migrations, the time may have been 1800 BCE. The place is also identifiable: Mamre, famous for its oak trees (or terebinths), is just north of Hebron, on the West Bank about 20 miles south of today's Jerusalem.

But if the time and place are real enough, the event itself is very mysterious: *YHWH appeared to Abraham by the oak grove of Mamre, while Abraham sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. Looking up, Abraham saw three travelers . . .*

Was it YHWH, or three travelers, that Abraham is encountering? The rather fluid identity of the guest or guests gets even more complicated as the story continues beyond today's reading. After the meal Abraham accompanies his guests part of the way toward their next destination, Sodom. He finds himself conversing with YHWH about whether Sodom really has to be destroyed. In the meantime two angels arrive at Sodom's gates and accept hospitality with Abraham's nephew, Lot.

So first we have YHWH, then three travelers, YHWH again, and then two angels. Later Christ-

ian tradition will see in this account a prefiguration of the Trinity. This is how we got the famous Russian icon form known as the Old Testament Trinity, which was itself derived from an earlier icon model known as the Hospitality of Abraham. (The earlier icon pictured three angels at a table with Abraham and Sarah waiting on them; the Trinity icon eliminates the hosts, leaving only the three angels.)

So Abraham was indeed “entertaining angels unawares.” He put a lot of effort into his hospitality. His verbal offer to his guests was for a little water for their feet, a place to rest, and a little food, but in fact this was no quick stopover at a roadside MacDonald’s. Abraham engaged Sarah to bake bread, from scratch. Then he chose a young animal from his herd and ordered a servant to slaughter, dress, and cook it. The meal, with all the preparations, must have taken hours.

I wonder when Abraham became aware of who his visitors were. Not while he was busy scurrying around, probably, but after the meal was served and there was time to chat. I would guess that it began to dawn on him when the visitors asked for Sarah (who, in keeping with desert tradition, had made herself scarce inside the tent) and then told Abraham that she would have a child before the year was out. The unexpected reward for the hospitality of this aged couple came when the work of hospitality had stopped, and the quiet togetherness with the guests had begun.

Martha also put a lot of work into her hospitality. Perhaps you feel, as I do, that she gets a raw deal in today’s gospel story, as well as in the traditional interpretations. These turn Martha and her sister into the archetypes of two lifestyles – action and contemplation; or life in the world and life apart from it – and then hierarchize them into superior and inferior ways of life. I think this does a disservice to Luke’s account, because it is simplistic, and sometimes self-serving.

One problem is that it excises the story from the realistic context into which Luke sets it. In the earlier part of Luke’s gospel, Jesus has been traveling all around Galilee. His ministry there, Luke tells us, was supported by the gifts – monetary or in-kind – of a number of women disciples. The evangelist names Mary of Magdala,

Joanna the wife of the steward of Herod Antipas, and Susanna, as well as others, who remain nameless.

After his Galilean sojourn, Jesus decides to head south towards Jerusalem. This means following the Jordan Valley along the edge of Samaritan territory. That is why, in recent weeks, you’ve been hearing about unfriendly Samaritan towns, and also, last week, Jesus’s parable about a “good Samaritan.” You have also been hearing about discipleship. Perhaps you remember the 72 disciples Jesus sent out two weeks ago.

So the immediate background to today’s reading is formed by a focus on discipleship, in particular the discipleship of women, as well as the fundamental need for hospitality in a region that could be hostile to mainline Jews like Jesus.

One of the interesting features of today’s story is that it is a woman, Martha, who *issues the invitation* to Jesus. She is clearly in charge of the household in this village in southern Galilee or the northern part of the Jordan River valley. Note that there is no male – no brother Lazarus – in this story. The version in John’s gospel about Martha, Mary and Lazarus takes place later in the narrative of Jesus’s life and further south, in Bethany, on the outskirts of Jerusalem; so if these are the same sisters, this event predates the strong friendship described by John.

It is also worth remembering that Luke mentions women hosting house churches in the Book of Acts. It was at Lydia’s house that the church of Philippi got started, and the house of Mary the mother of John-Mark provided refuge to the disciples in Jerusalem itself. This form of discipleship was absolutely crucial to the early church, and it had its roots with people like Martha.

We have to assume that Martha has no better idea of who Jesus is than most people. To her, he is certainly a teacher, reputedly a wonder-worker, possibly even a prophet, but she has no idea that she is entertaining unawares the Son of God incarnate (to use later Christian theological language)! Nonetheless, her hospitality, like that of the women who followed Jesus in Galilee, is a form of discipleship.

Her sister Mary is also behaving like a disciple – and this is the point of the story – by sitting at Jesus’s feet and listening to his teaching – just

like the male disciples. Jesus will not let her be relegated to the kitchen like poor Sarah in the back of Abraham's tent.

As for the words Jesus speaks to Martha, I hear them not as a reproach, but as an invitation: “Martha, Martha . . . Relax! You are trying to do too much! Hang up your apron and come keep us company!”

The traditional commentaries are right to point out that this story illustrates two aspects of discipleship, but I think it is a mistake to hierarchize them, or to categorize people or vocations under one or the other label. The two aspects of hospitality – *preparation* and *presence* – go hand in hand, as any host or hostess knows.

We know this when we look around *this* church and see all the people who exercise some form of hospitality in our own community: those who plan our monthly community get-togethers, those who organize events for the women of the Safe Parking program or for the children up in Guadalupe, those who prepare and set up for our liturgies each week. I won't even begin to name names, because I would have to list everybody here! We all know that there is a lot of work involved, but the reward is great.

But now it is time to hang up our aprons, be present to each other, enjoy this company of friends, and open our hearts and minds to the unseen presence of God in our midst.