

Church of the Ascension – Proper 11C – July 21, 2019

In Nomine+

The norms for social encounters among nomadic peoples were long established and deeply rooted in practical experience by the time Abraham and Sarah left Haran in present day Turkey and established themselves as a presence in the outback of the Levant. Visitors, whether strangers or known passers-by were to be, one might say, lavishly welcomed and offered food and water for their animals which the scriptures call provender, refreshment and rest for themselves, water to wash the dust from their throats and feet, and as bountiful a meal as the host could provide. Overnight accommodations were part of the package since the length of stay could be as long as three days, or as long as it took, so it was believed, to fully digest that welcoming meal. This ritual served many practical purposes. First, it insured the safety and well-being of all the parties. If one offered the best of what he had, it was unlikely that he would be robbed or attacked. Second, strangers/visitors offered some welcome social interaction with outsiders, someone from outside the closed family unit that made up nomadic enclaves. It was an opportunity for social networking, swapping stories, gossip, news that was hard to come by in such geographically isolated situations. It also insured that when and if the tables were turned, the host or members of his family would have the same courtesies extended to them when necessary. And thirdly, in a land of such scarcity, the presence of ample food and water, when it was needed was the best kind of insurance policy for a long and happy life. Only a fool and an idiot would deny even an enemy relief and comfort when in necessity.

It is not hard to see all these elements at play in the encounter of Abraham and Sarah with the three mysterious strangers. The offer of rest and refreshment, the hurriedly prepared meal of fresh bread, newly slaughtered veal, curds and milk, the attention to meeting every need, the imparting of news and finally, his walking with them as they departed, all speak to Abraham's strict compliance to the code of the desert and vindicates the amazing reward he received for adhering to it.

A century or two later, all this became part of the Law of the Israelites. In Exodus 22: 21, we read, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." With some elaboration, this grew into a mandatory code of conduct for hospitality among all observant Jews. Evidence of this custom is easily discernable. When Jesus sent his disciples out on their missionary journey, for example, by his instructions "to take nothing with them," it is clear that he expected them to be received as guests and invited into the homes of unknown villagers whom they met, and to be adequately provided for during their stay. If said hospitality was not forthcoming, they were to leave! And shake the dust off their feet as well (since it hadn't been washed off, I suppose).

You may be wondering what all this has to do with our lessons for the day. Why am I not talking about the miraculous birth of Isaac to a couple too old to conceive, or rhapsodizing on the deutero-Pauline exposition from Colossians, or finding clarity and purpose for Christian living in the story of Mary and Martha? These are certainly the traditional themes for this Sunday. But frankly, we've all heard the Abraham story many, many times, and we are pretty well imbued with the Pauline take on the salvific work of Christ, and I find the traditional comparison of the active life to the contemplative life derived from Saint Luke's Gospel, unsatisfactory and antithetical to my own

experience. The Gospel seems to lead us to the conclusion that Mary's choice to sit at Jesus feet is preferable to Martha's extraordinary efforts at pre-Christian hospitality. That is the sermon you and I have all heard for years, and it is the one I have decided not to preach, today.

Some of you may remember a dear friend of mine, Beverly Scott, who was a frequent visitor to the Church of the Ascension, though a long-time and faithful member with me at the Cathedral. Beverly and I were discussing this Lukan passage some years ago, probably at Cartons, a long defunct Near North eatery where church people often gathered. At one point, Beverly declared: "Well, I'm a Martha, and I can't seem to do anything about that. I guess God will just have to accept me that way. I think it's probably His fault anyway!"

Now, I was taken a little aback, because Beverly was one of the most seriously and intentionally spiritual people I have ever known, but I could certainly echo her lament without equivocation. I, too, had felt called to actively participate in the life of the church. I was an usher, a reader, an acolyte, and M.C., a sometime Sunday school teacher, a member of several committees, even an ex-officio member of the Altar Guild (official membership being denied me because I was a man). I was jumping the hoops to be named an aspirant for Holy Orders, not to mention involvement in other social action groups and working full time in drug and alcohol rehabilitation at Grant Hospital. Yep, I had to admit, I was a Martha, too.

But I longed to be otherwise. I wanted to sit at Jesus' feet, too. I took classes in meditation, did yoga, increased my intentional prayer life, added the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, as well as Noontime and Compline to my rule of life, and, I must say, I reaped the spiritual and personal rewards of all of them. Yet, I was as busy, maybe busier, than ever! What can the matter be, I said? What I came to realize was, that every time I sat down at Jesus feet to attend to his teaching, He told me to get up and do something more for the spread of the kingdom. My contemplation inevitably lead me to action or in another word, to an active and purposeful ministry and an aspiring witness to Christ's uncompromising law -- Love God! Love your neighbor!

I might have felt uncomfortable with that realization if actual Christian history had not so clearly revealed and born out to me a kind of inevitability, repeated over and over again in record of those who answered the call to the contemplative life. The history of monasticism is replete with examples. Giving a pass to the first desert fathers (who may have been nuts), from the very beginning of cenobite monasticism, intentionally contemplative communities actively asserted themselves by establishing schools, hospitals, orphanages, hostels, soup kitchens and refuges and retreats. They worked continually to improve power sources, food production, time keeping, spurred agricultural innovations, beer, wine and cheese making. swamp drainage and land reclamation, to name only a few of their scientific and industrial undertakings. They founded libraries and universities and stabilized whole economies and established peace and tranquility for entire regions. Not content simply to sit and pray, our own Sisters of Saint Anne recently opened a new ministry, a shelter for women recovering from addiction in Rogers Park. To my mind, this is what happens when we sit at Jesus' feet and heed his teaching. We just get more to do!

In light of all this, taking a second look at Jesus' interaction with Martha, I find the central criticism, if it can be called that, to be not that Martha is busy providing the requisite hospitality, but that she is "distracted." Martha has made being the hostess with the most-est her entire focus.

Perhaps her ambition to welcome Jesus and his disciples had outgrown her ability to achieve it. One possible interpretation of the phrase “There is need of only one thing,” may suggest that the menu was too complicated or extensive. One dish would have been sufficient, leaving her time to be a good hostess and sit at Jesus feet, also. Maybe her desire to gain or enhance her social status overtook her desire to serve. Maybe her action became an ego driven exercise. We can’t say for sure, but it is not what Martha was doing that was the problem, but the way she was doing it. She had lost the ministry of hospitality perspective, and her service had become, instead, a demanding series of irksome tasks and stressful obligations that became huge distractions, keeping her from participating in the really unique opportunity Christ’s presence afforded her. She was so busy, she was missing a priceless gift, entirely!

My desire, here, is that we not walk away this morning, just wondering whether we qualify as a Mary or a Martha, or thinking that we are somehow excused from Christian social action, from doing something, because we choose to be or desire to become contemplative. There is in our world, today, a great and undeniable call to Christians everywhere to not be distracted, but to act with Jesus’ clear voice ringing in their ear. Last week we heard Jesus redefine and clarify who our neighbor is. That redefinition excludes no one, laying the call to be a neighbor, first, squarely on the head of each one of us. This week, we are enjoined not to be distracted in this effort to reach out to those who are neighbors in waiting, to offer hospitality and friendship to those who are far off and to do it in the name of Christ. There are strangers everywhere calling for us to become their neighbors, for whom undistracted care, concern and active hospitality is required. We who by nature “were once estranged and hostile in mind,” but who have been taken into the body of Christ and welcomed as family, are bidden to sit at the feet of Jesus, hear his words, and act accordingly and to not let the noise and chaos of the contemporary world distract us from our common, love-driven mission.

Pray, then do!

Amen.