

"THE GOOD HOST"

**MOTHER MARCIA'S SERMON FOR JULY 17, 2022
CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

1
Many years ago, I was part of a mission group working with the Maya Quiche seminarians of Chichicastengo. One Sunday, we were invited to take part in a Holy Eucharist at the small home parish of Pasquala. Pasquala was a thirty-five year old Maya Quiche seminarian, a grandmother, with a third grade education; she was short and strong and determined. - She later became the first Maya Quiche woman priest and I adored her.

We drove on smaller and smaller roads, and dirt paths and parked high up on a mountain, and followed a narrow path through the scraggly corn fields and past wooden one room huts until we came to the 'church'. It was, as all the others, just one room, framed in wood, with benches nailed into the sides, but oh, when you stepped in, the congregation had layered pine needles over the the dirt floor and wildflowers on top. Every step was a bouquet of fragrance cushioning your feet. The altar was small, but flowers piled against the feet and two small clay pots held more, along with the tiny boldly painted cross.

I was to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. It was a big occasion, because ordinarily it was months between having a priest, with Pasquala serving as a deacon and distributing blessed bread and wine to her parishioners. It was also a comedy, as I was using a Spanish Book of Common Prayer and I barely spoke 20 words of Spanish, my pronunciation was awful! But then the congregation all spoke Quiche, and very little Spanish, so we were about equal.

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After the Communion, after the careful storing of elements for the next months, bread in a tin box, wine in a plastic soda bottle, we were welcomed to join the community in a feast.

With great solemnity and pride, we were seated, and each one of us was offered a cup of CocaCola, and a hot-right-from the coals-sweet potato. And a small bag of apples, misshapen and uneven, but surely most of the season's wealth.

We ate our hot potatoes, without plates or utensils, and sang more hymns, and left with our apple bags. I took mine home to the US and made applesauce, and it was sweet, so sweet.

It was a lifetime's moment of hospitality.

In our Holy Scripture today, we hear two passages, stories of radical hospitality.

In Genesis, Father Abraham is visited by a trio of angels, unaware.

Although the saga of Abraham and Sarah rivals any television soap opera, or tabloid, "75 year old man uproots family and leaves on trip to undisclosed destination at God's command," or "Husband trades his wife to the Pharaoh for his own safety," or "elderly couples with fertility issue is promised countless offspring," when we encounter Abraham and Sarah now, some years later, things seem to have settled down. Abraham has decided to adopt his servant Eliezer as heir. Sarah was resigned to be childless. And they were camped semi-permanently it seemed by the Oaks of Mamre at Hebron.

③

And one day, like the start of a good fairy tale, three men; Angels, appear at the camp. Abraham jumps into the full hospitality mode. Hospitality in the culture of the ancient near east, and now, was a sacred custom, a formal code. To live in the desert and arid lands meant a harsh life or death dependence on food and water. Journeys depended on the welcome of others and shared resources even in scarcity.

A host was required to provide food, water and safety.

Such gracious customs survive today. I've never been to our Afghan family's home that tea and sweets and a variety of foodstuffs were not presented immediately.

Abraham embraces his duty wholeheartedly, although a closer reading of the passage shows that he himself does very little of the work! He tells Sarah to make cakes, he calls the servant to kill and prepare the meat. I guess he gives the water. \One could preach this text as ~~as~~ our acknowledgement of how many 'behind the scenes' persons do our service, make us look good, and are often ignored? I always remember my brother Rob, who if you go out to eat at a restaurant and don't leave a highly generous tip for the waiter is incensed. He put himself through vet school waiting on tables and hasn't for a minute forgotten.

In our text, Sarah is even more absent. She remains off-stage left, even when we are aware she can hear, and even though the conversation directly concerns her person and well being. The angels announce the coming of a child, but no one asks how a 90 year old woman in a time of already uncertain labor and delivery feels about the prospect.

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Abraham has heard the promise before, three times, but Sarah is hearing her fate for the first time, pronounced.

Abraham laughed. But one wonders if Sarah was quite so excited.

The question then again, is who is ~~the~~ hospitality for? And who do we leave unheard or unconsidered - out of the very conversation and decision making?

Our Gospel reading from Luke 10:38 - 42 begins again with the tale of hospitality. One commentary made me laugh, it said that if Luke's Gospel were a McDonald's menu, this short story of Martha and Mary would be a chicken nugget! Although we hear much more of Martha and Mary in John's Gospel, John 12: 1-11, here in these four verses immediately following the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus again overturns expectations, and shocks his hearers.

Hospitality in first century Palestine, just as for the ancestors Abraham and Sarah, was not a trivial practice. Eating together is an invitation to belong to the family circle. Guests are protected and allowed to share this family space. The woman's role is to do the cooking and food preparation and it would be unusual for a Palestinian woman to participate at the table with the male guests before they had completed all the food preparation and serving. Luke's statement that Martha opened her home suggests that Martha was an independent woman, perhaps a widow. If she had lived in Lazarus' home, Luke would have termed the house his. Martha then is anxious to offer a welcome for Jesus and his followers. She does her duty willingly.

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Mary however shocks her sister by taking the role of an active disciple, sitting and listening at the feet of her teacher.

Jesus does not discourage her from listening and learning the word of God.

So there is a conflict. Martha exhausted by the burden of hospitality asks Jesus if he isn't offended by Mary's failure to help her sister, as she should. Her complaint is fair. But Jesus, though he acknowledges Martha's tiredness and stress, reminds her of her distraction. And, he praises Mary for choosing to listen rather than to serve at table.

Traditionally this pericope has been used to demonstrate the superiority of 'listening to the word of God' rather than 'doing' for God. In the Middle Ages, it was framed as the superior call to monastic life over layministry. But set in the context of the early church, the problem is framed as a pull between two kinds of ministries: the diakonia, or ministry of service which Martha represents and the ministry of the word which Mary represents. In this context, Jesus does not prefer the ministry of service to be at the expense of the ministry of the word. Both ministries are important.

This struggle was reflected in the Book of Acts where the apostles find themselves unable to serve all the widows and others in need and call and form the seven male deacons.

It must be noted though that even here the two ministries are not exclusive - Stephen and Phillip are only two of the deacons who engage in important ministries of the word.



In a sense, Jesus response to Martha says less about Mary's place in sitting at his feet than it does remind us that learning God's word is what inspires believers to serve.

In a pulpit somewhere in a church in North Carolina, a piece of notepaper is taped to the shelf where the preacher stands. On it is written in ballpoint, "So what?"

How can we listen to the word we hear today, and be shaped by that listening to action?

In the first discussion, I mentioned the 'other' - those who are not acknowledged or heard or even noticed, Sarah behind the curtain, who did the work but was not included in the very conversation of the event which would directly affect her own body and life. Certainly, we don't need to look far in our current political and social context to find those others, whether it is in The Handmaid's Tale red capes or in the issue of gun violence and gun control or immigration.

I don't think there has ever been a time more necessary for all of us to be immersed in both God's word spoken for God's people, to form our actions, our responses to injustice. But at the same time, facing what feels like an uphill battle for human rights, depends on our nourishing our souls, on our deepening our relationship to the Jesus Christ who knows and loves and feeds us personally and communally.



Second, even in Christ Church where diakonia is so prominent in our outreach and inreach ministry, there is still the 20/80 ratio: 20% of the congregation does the nitty gritty work of maintaining the church institution to provide for the 80% who are members. We still need many Marthas, to be ushers and altar guild and tellers and Sunday School teachers, to help our faithful grounds keepers, and even take a hand at cleaning bathrooms when we are trying to find a sexton.

We shouldn't hope for exhausted Martha's to take it all on.

"So what?" What are you doing to nurture yourself in the Word and Presence of Christ, and, what are you doing to serve where service is needed?

Amen.