

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (7/21), 2019

Genesis 18:1-10a; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

It is the contention of Rowan Greer, for many years the Walter H Gray Professor of Anglican history at Yale Divinity School, in his superb book, *Broken Lights and Mended Lives*, that hospitality is amongst the most telling of hallmarks of the early Christian communities of the Mediterranean basin and, to this day, remains amongst the most clearly distinguishing hallmarks of Christian life and behavior.

While it is presumptuous of me even to suggest that my accord with Father Greer's thinking is anything more than the thinking of a midget standing upon the shoulders of a giant, I do find his assertion precise and telling.

If we, as Christian men and women, will not openly welcome the stranger, sojourner, visitor, and even friend in our midst, then who, in heaven's name, will?

The roots of such thinking go far back beyond the time of the early Church. Think of the times we hear much of hospitality in the course of the Old Testament as a prelude to improved relations between two parties...to good news being delivered to the discouraged and downtrodden...and on and on. The recounting of the three strangers' visit to Abraham and Sarah is rife with the importance of hospitality...and recall that it is the initiatory moment of the revelation of the reality of the people of God. It is the foretelling of the birth of a nation...of an entirely new manner of human thought and belief.

So too, at the home of Martha and Mary, endless outpourings of generosity and hospitality. The list of what precisely is offered is not precisely enumerated, but it is clear that Martha was absolutely killing herself in the kitchen and house to make Jesus welcome there.

It is not so hard to imagine what is taking place. Quick, make sure the table is wiped clean as a pin. Get the flour rising so it is ready to bake at meal time. Take the brie out of the fridge so it's got time to soften. Lord, are there proper colored candles for the good tablecloth? Is the white wine chilled properly... and is the red uncorked and breathing? Dear heavens, there are salt spots on the salad forks! And on and on and on.

Meanwhile, Jesus speaks of those things of life he has come to enlighten...to, even, redeem...and Martha, becoming completely distracted by her fussing and worrying that she do everything perfectly, at one point actually blurts out, "For crying out loud, don't you see the trouble I am going to, and Mary, my sister, per usual, is sitting on her duff not doing anything to help. Would you please tell her to get cracking! I mean, my gosh, the cream isn't even whipped yet for the strawberry shortcake...and I only have two hands."

And so we see, in most clear terms, that hospitality, true hospitality, doesn't really have much to do with "doing" but rather with "being."

Jesus gently notes that being troubled...in fact, more precisely, troubling yourself...which is different from "going to a bit of trouble"...is not that to which hospitality relates.

It has to do with engagement with the one to whom hospitality is being offered.

How many of us have done it a thousand times? Invited people over...killed ourselves preparing so that all is exactly perfect...rushed from one thing to another to be certain every course was presented perfectly...music was just the right choice and volume...fireplace blazing as if from a Currier and Ives etching...food presented and plates cleared at exactly the correct time...wine glasses never empty...and ended up being so distracted and exhausted that we could not remember much of anything that was discussed during the course of the evening.

It is not to say that offering hospitality has nothing to do with preparing a meal...or pouring tea...or whatever. The intimacy of the dining room or the parlor...of such openings of ourselves to another...bespeaks a vulnerability that is the ground of human honesty and candor and is a commendable state of affairs.

By themselves, however, they offer little save superficial nicety and show. It is when they are the vehicle that allows us to begin to listen, truly listen, to those to whom we have opened our doors...whether old friend or stranger...in our home or in our Parish...that Christian hospitality begins to be present.

When we begin truly to hear another...truly to see another...truly to allow ourselves to be heard and to be seen...that God begins to be incarnate in our midst in manners redemptive and gracious.

Yes, the things of this world...whether teapots or the good china or fine wine...have all, in some mysterious manner, been made holy by the incarnation of God in the midst of this world. It is, however, in our fellow journeyers in this life that we find, not only glimpses of the holy, but God incarnate, for we have been assured that each of us...and each with whom we journey...has been made in the image and likeness of God.

If, in our “busyness”...our mindless rushing about...our quest for perfection...we fail to leave space to be still...to listen...to sit at the feet of another concentrating only on what and who that other is...whether close acquaintance or stranger...seeking to hear and see...to be heard and be seen...as each of us really is...then we will, in Jesus’ words, have missed the “better part”...and our hospitality will only be a sham for our wanting to be perceived as perfect.

The world does not like such thinking, for it begins to make us clearer and clearer about what is truly important as opposed to that which is artifice and show...and, as that clarity comes, the world can no longer tell us...make us chase after...make us mindlessly “just have to possess or look like or drive or eat or travel to or on”...make us jump to its tune regarding those things over which we will not allow it to exercise authority.

In the quietness and stillness of the honesty of whom and what we and another are, the “better portion” is to be found. The world cannot confer it...only the grace of God can...and that grace comes, not by our perfection or rushing about...but in God’s good time and as God wills to confer it to those who are open to receiving it.