



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 17, 2022

Dr. Jeff Jones
“Rocket Surgery and Brain Science”

Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him.^[a] ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus’s^[b] feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me.” ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—indeed only one.^[c] Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

The Word of the Lord.

THANKS BE TO GOD

This past Wednesday morning I was working from home and the phone rang. I knew what it was about but I didn’t want to answer it and yet I knew I had to. “Hello” I said.

“Jeffrey, it’s Anna Louise... I need your sermon title for the bulletin.”

“Rocket Surgery and Brain Science” is what you get when publication deadlines come before inspiration strikes.

Today’s thumbnail and bulletin cover says more about the messenger than it does the message. This is EXACTLY how I felt upon my first reading of today’s scripture lessons!

Thanks be to God that the spirit works and inspiration comes.

The theme emerging from both of our text this morning is that of hospitality. It’s

not catchy or witty but it is what it is - hospitality.

In the south we know something about hospitality. From formal dinner parties to wedding showers, from funeral wakes to graduation celebrations. There are expectations of how things are to be done. Mind you the good China only comes out at Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. We dust off our copy of Emily Post or Amy Vanderbilt to remind ourselves the exact placement of the pickle fork or the bread plate. And don't forget all the fancy pressed linens, the appropriate dress for the occasion, and the manners. And for goodness sake keep your elbows off the table!

Southern hospitality differs greatly from biblical hospitality. Biblical Hospitality is rooted in the *Shema*, the fundamental Hebrew prayer. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." -- an Old Testament pericope, modeled and expanded in the life and ministry of Jesus and central to today's message.

Our gospel reading is flanked by the story of the Good Samaritan on one side and the Lord's prayer on the other. Seeing today's story of hospitality in the larger context is helpful. The exchange between Jesus and the lawyer trying to test him sets the stage: "Teacher, what must I do to be saved?" prompted by Jesus to answer his own question - the lawyer quotes The *Shema*. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Then Jesus clarifies who our "neighbor" is in the story of the good Samaritan.

Enter Martha and Mary – or more accurately; Enter Jesus-- into the home of Martha and Mary. We have no way of knowing for sure, but it is likely that Jesus is not alone. He was traveling with his disciples, and most recently, with the full complement of 72 disciples. The offer of hospitality extended to Jesus probably included those who were with him. It's possible Martha had her hands full! As someone who loves to entertain – I can handle one or two guests with ease but show up at my door with an entourage and I'm going to panic.

The stage is set: Jesus is teaching. Mary is listening. Martha is working. Martha is distracted. Hospitality is an art form. It is no small task to have the silver polished, the table set, the hors d'oeuvres out and all while doing meal prep in the kitchen: timing the tenderloin to come out at the perfect temperature and not letting the mashed potatoes get cold or dry.

Jesus understood the role of hospitality. Earlier in this chapter he had instructed the 72 disciples to eat whatever was placed before them when they entered someone's home. There was an expected culture of Hospitality. Martha wants everything to be perfect. When her frustration reaches its limit, she goes to Jesus. Mind you, Martha is doing nothing wrong. Perhaps she is over functioning... But let's be realistic - there are expectations for hospitality - and the Lord himself is sitting in her house teaching and waiting to be served. Who among us wouldn't stress over that? Isn't it interesting that she doesn't speak to Mary? And Mary never talks in this story. Martha attempts to triangulate with Jesus and Jesus isn't having it. He replies Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part.

This is not a story of Martha vs. Mary. There is no competition here. Interpreting this from our vantage point, I suspect those of us raised in White, mainstream or evangelical churches are quick to judge and see Jesus' words as a harsh criticism and admonition. Let's face it. The church has done a good job of instilling fear and judgment in each of us... teaching of an angry, righteous judgmental God, always bent on corrective discipline. What if we could see Jesus' words in this moment as pastoral and invitational instead of judgmental and corrective? Martha...Martha.... Oh, that WE were able to listen from a place of love and not a place of fear.

I suspect many of us hear in this epizeuxis the sarcasm and contemptuous tone of that Brady Bunch episode ringing in our ears... Martha! Martha! Martha! ---When in fact, I am convinced that this is Jesus in a pastoral voice naming Martha, creating space for her in the moment and offering her an invitational word to step away from her exhaustion and join Mary for what is at that moment, the better part.

Exhaustion and burnout should not be the result of hospitality. Jesus is saying Martha, check yourself. If there is one thing I learned in my sabbatical it was to make space to rest, to sit, to listen. The work is important but it's not the only thing. Grace Covenant, check yourself in the work you are doing and hear the invitation, the permission, to step away from the work and renew yourself. Do not work yourself into exhaustion: We are not called to die upon the altar of the church.

Fred Craddock says "if we asked Jesus which example we are to follow, the active Good Samaritan or the contemplative Mary, Jesus would probably say "Yes."

Hospitality not only means opening our homes but also opening our hearts.

And Let's not forget Amos. There's a lesson of Biblical Hospitality here as well.

Now there is nothing uplifting in the book of Amos. Even Tami proclaimed it in her sermon last week-- it was simply too difficult and depressing to preach from --thus her motivation to choose another reading from the lectionary. Now as the GCPC staff version of Eeyore, yours truly heard that as a challenge and said hold my beer... OK, Let's be honest "hold my coffee" is more like it.

If you are about to embark on reading the Old Testament for the first time; I would not suggest starting with Amos. It's dark. Very dark. My guess is that no one has ever said "Alexa --play Amos"- but here we are, searching for signs of hospitality among the prophets!

Amos paints a catastrophic and apocalyptic vision of Israel's destruction. Their future is dire --and why? Whenever we see God's anger and judgment on display it's always a good question to ask why.

Today's passage makes it abundantly clear: Israel is trampling on the needy, bringing ruin to the poor, cheating them in the marketplace with false weights and measurements, and devaluing their humanity to the point of treating them like chattel...

Now. If there's ever any question whose side God is on? Ask yourself this

question: who is in need of Justice? That's where you will find God every time. When those in power control the economic systems and exploit those systems in their favor —God is going to call it out. Every. Single. Time. When those in power exploit political systems and ecclesiastical systems and familial systems in a way that takes advantage of and disadvantages the poor and the needy... When fairness is absent ... It's there you will find God standing like Gandolf and that iconic moment on the bridge in *Lord of the Rings* —facing that hideous embodiment of all that is evil: The Balrog --- slamming his scepter into the ground and proclaiming: YOU SHALL NOT PASS! There is nothing more vile to God than abusing power, there is no uglier creature than one who would advantage self and disadvantage others. God never said anything about LGBTQIA individuals. God never said anything about abortion. But God said a hell of a lot about the poor and the needy and the orphan and the widow — about all who deserve yet are denied a place at the table. In God's economy hospitality does not exploit neighbor.

Hear this Grace Covenant:

God's judgment is not a judgment of fear and condemnation but a judgment of a faithful invitation to true hospitality.

Does God want destruction? No. God wants to change. God wants engagement. God wants God's people to extend hospitality and fairness. To do anything less brings judgment and destruction.

in the words of Richard Rohr:

“Because the prophet or prophetess speaks truthfully in the largest context, after the fact, it does not appear that they foretold something. But prophecy is much closer to the Eastern idea of karma or that what goes around comes around. Prophets teach how reality works by sharing what's going to happen. You keep destroying the earth, and you're not going to survive. That's not a threat; it's a description.

Unfortunately, however, Christians often read prophets as using threats to try to change behavior, when really they're just showing us the universal patterns that are always true. This is the Karma of events: evil is its own punishment, and goodness its own reward.”

The irony here is that Israel was liberated from the oppression of the Egyptians and now has become the oppressor. How many times in history has this happened? And how many times does it continue unchecked? And isn't that what God is calling us to? To check ourselves, to check our motives, to check our power, to check our privilege?? Because when we don't, we set into motion the wheels of our own destruction and we plant the seeds of our own demise.

Grace Covenant, we can get busy setting the table, polishing the silver and getting out the dessert spoons. We can press our finest formal wear and remind ourselves not to chew with our mouths open. . . or we can hear the call to God's hospitality of justice. A hospitality that values our neighbor as much as we value ourselves. Not ONLY a hospitality of action but a hospitality of values. Hospitality that serves AND listens, a hospitality of sacrifice where the Shema is fulfilled and "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" becomes our lived reality.

Thanks be to God.