

Acts of Hospitality

Rev. Nancy Willet
Gen. 18: 1-10,
Luke 10:38-42

July 25, 2010

First Presbyterian Church
Uvalde, TX

Some of you may know that I made several trips to Guatemala before I started seminary to work with the churches in the Norte Presbytery there. It was on my second trip to Guatemala that I had the pleasant experience of getting to help prepare food in the kitchen along side the Guatemalan women who were members of the church where our group was working.

I learned how to make those really great black beans, chicken with rice, guacamole, and other *platos tipicos*, or typical dishes of Guatemala. However, one thing I really wanted to learn to make was tortillas. Tortillas are traditionally served with *every* meal, including breakfast, and I was surprised that on this particular day, no one was making tortillas.

I asked one of my new friends if I could learn to make tortillas. She quickly gathered some other women together and started conversing in Spanish at a rate way too fast for *me* to understand. Before I knew it, all the women had their coin purses out, pooling their money together to buy the needed ingredients for tortillas, which probably didn't amount to more than \$1. They rounded up a couple of the ever-present kids to go to the market, and within 5 minutes we were all set for my first tortilla making lesson from a group of true tortilla making pros!

I've got to tell you, these women's acts of hospitality will be etched in my mind forever. They have waited on us, and served us in so many ways already, making us feel very much like welcomed visitors, and now, seeing them combining their meager funds in order to fulfill one of *my* requests, I was filled with a mixture of wonder, gratitude, guilt, and humility.

You know, my tortillas never did turn out as perfectly round or as thin as theirs'. The whole process from the gathering of the money, to learning how to pat out the tortillas, to becoming drenched with sweat while standing over the hot grill where the tortillas were cooked was so much more than a cooking lesson to me. It was, to me, a true lesson in love, and a lesson in pure hospitality.

Hospitality in the Jewish tradition was originally offered to complete strangers. Hospitality was an essential value in the culture during biblical times. "Because travel was a dangerous venture, codes of hospitality were strict. If a sworn enemy showed up at your doorstep asking for food and shelter, you were bound by these codes to supply his request, along with protection and safe passage as long as he was on your land."ⁱ Everyone, at one time or another had to travel through enemy territory, so hospitality became a matter of survival. It was a type of social covenant, an unwritten

commitment, if you will, that people would rise about human differences in order to meet common human needs.

In Scripture, however, hospitality was more than a social covenant. Hospitality was a way of meeting and receiving the holy presence of God. In today's Old Testament lesson from Genesis, we read about how Abraham graciously served the strangers who passed by his tent in the heat of the day. Even though the passage starts out with "the *Lord* appeared to Abraham," it says that Abraham "looked up and saw three men." Who were these men? Who did Abraham think they were, and just what did they have to do with God?

Abraham treated these men, whom **we** know as messengers of God, the same way he would treat any strangers. He ran out to meet them, and provided for them in the customary ways by bringing cool water to wash their dry and dusty feet, and offering them rest from their journey in the shade of the large oak trees. He hastened and had Sarah make cakes from **choice** flour, and prepared a **good and tender** calf for their feast. The text said Abraham stood by them under the tree and waited while they ate. He was ready to be a good host in whatever way might come up. It was not until later that Abraham truly realized that the visit was from God. When God appears in our lives, it is often a mystery to us at the time, and not something that is realized until later.

God had made a promise to Abraham—the promise that he would be the father of a great nation. Now we know that you can't be a father of a nation unless you have an heir. Abraham needed someone to carry on the tradition; he needed Isaac so that his role could be fulfilled. We see in this story, Abraham's hospitality—his welcoming disposition—is what enabled God to fulfill this promise. What that means to me, is that when God makes a promise to you or me, we must have open and willing hearts ready to receive the goodness and hospitality God so longs to give us.

Hospitality in the New Testament is abundant as well. During Jesus' ministry on earth, he was often a guest in people's homes. The reading from Luke today tells about such a visit and offers another look at hospitality in the Bible.

Martha and Mary were the sisters of Lazarus, and were all dear friends of Jesus. The first thing we read is that Mary was sitting at the Lord's feet listening to what he was saying. Sitting at someone's feet was the usual position a person would take that was assuming the role of a student listening to her teacher. Next we heard about Martha and how busy she was with all her many tasks. For some reason, we always assume she was in the kitchen preparing food. However, the word task is translated from the Greek word *diakonia*, and is used 8 other times in the book of Luke in terms of participation in leadership and ministry on behalf of the Christian community.

Martha was distressed, worried and distracted by church work! I think Jesus was trying to tell Martha that even church work could distract you from “the only one thing which, she—and we—are in need of.”

But wait a minute—weren’t we talking about hospitality? It seems like if we take Martha out of the kitchen and put her in a leadership role, we are taking away from the hospitality aspect of this lesson. Not really, though.

The important thing to remember about hospitality is that all **our acts of hospitality are merely *responses* to the hospitality that **God** has shown to us.** God’s first act of supreme hospitality was creation. God’s 2nd act of hospitality was the Incarnation—God becoming flesh and living on earth among us. And the essence of God’s hospitality was extended to us when Jesus Christ gave up his life for us on the cross because he loved us so much.

Today, we celebrate God’s hospitality to us when we have a baptism in our congregation, or when we remember our baptism each Sunday. “God opens the door to the family house and says, ‘Welcome home, my child!’”ⁱⁱ When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together, is that not a way in which God offers to us God’s hospitality? God brings us together at the table saying “come, take, eat, see what I have prepared for you! Come join with me in the feast I have arranged especially for you!” What a host!

To think of receiving hospitality from God of such an overwhelming magnitude can be very humbling. How can we ever reciprocate? Well, we can’t ever fully reciprocate, but what our first act of hospitality to God should be is to **receive** with joyful hearts the great acts of hospitality God has given to us.

That is what I believe Jesus was telling Martha when she was complaining about having too much to do. Mary was the one extending the type of hospitality that Jesus desired. There was Jesus, offering so freely his grace, his time, his attention, and his love, and Martha was so distracted by other tasks, that she was passing up a perfect time to reciprocate some of God’s hospitality. Jesus tells Martha that the most important thing that he is asking her to do is to be receptive, to be open, to be quiet. To hear all that he is longing to teach her.

That is the same challenge Jesus offers us today. Can we look at our lives, and hold them up against these guidelines that the Lord has shown us through his servants, Abraham, Martha and Mary? Are we receptive to God? Are we quiet enough to hear God? Are we open to what God is telling? And have we learned something from our time spent with God?

We don’t have to choose between being a Martha or a Mary, between being a doer or a thinker—I think we need to be a little of both. Like Abraham and Martha, we should want to give our best and give it freely, but we should also take a lesson from Mary as she sat at the feet of Jesus hanging on his every word, and like Abraham as he waited patiently by the

tree as his guests ate. We need to be willing to listen and be receptive to what God has to offer us.

“God in Christ has received us into his own dwelling place, where we find in plenty all we have need of: forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, comfort, peace, and joy—abundant life for body and soulⁱⁱⁱ.” It is up to us now to come to God in genuine humility and receive what God gives us so freely.

Let us pray:

God of grace and abundance, who gives us more than we could ever hope for, take these words we have heard today, and by the power of you Holy Spirit transform them according to your will and purpose, so that we may glorify you in all we do. Amen.

ⁱ Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995). 120.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 124.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 125.