

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost • July 21, 2013

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 10:38-42

“Signs of the Church: Hospitality”

We know hospitality. Here at St. John's, we have a lot going on to welcome the people who arrive as our guests. Our greeters stand at the ready with friendly faces to say hello to everyone who walks in our doors before services each week. Our Welcome Center is staffed by knowledgeable and approachable folks who are available to answer questions and point visitors to our congregation in the right direction. Our members bring in all kinds of snacks and refreshments for everyone to share after the service on Saturday evening or at “Grab & Go” on Sunday morning. It's good stuff. And that's just on the weekends! Some of our members host small-group huddles and Bible study at their homes. Others work together to coordinate big events – like the celebration we enjoyed just last weekend – or to beautify and improve the church grounds, facilities, or sanctuary for all those who come to be with us throughout the week. Yes, it can be a lot of work, but it is work that helps to show that our guests are welcomed.

Hospitality is very much about welcome. Real, honest hospitality welcomes the outsider to be a part of the community that has opened its doors to him. See if you can recall the last time that you showed hospitality to someone. Has it been a while? In the ancient near east, hospitality played a much bigger role in people's lives. In other parts of the world, the same hospitality that Abraham showed to his three visitors is practiced in much the same way. When someone, even a stranger, would happen to come by the place where you lived, you invited them to stay with you, to enjoy a time of refreshment and fellowship as they rested from their travels. If you took someone in as a guest, you cared for them as your own, even providing protection for them. You heard that Abraham brought out far more than a morsel of bread for his guests, feeding them with not just cakes, but milk and curds and steak – the good stuff! We could say that he “rolled out the red carpet” for those visitors. That's hospitality. **Simply put, it is the practice of self-giving – which is the very essence of love – to your guest.**

Looking back on the Gospel reading, Martha practiced a kind of hospitality with which you and I are probably more familiar: entertaining houseguests. Jesus arrives in Bethany, the town where she lives with her sister Mary and brother Lazarus, and Martha welcomes him and his disciples into her home. It would have been a little unexpected for a woman to offer such hospitality to a rabbi like Jesus – and also kind of unexpected for him to accept that offer – but Jesus comes in and begins speaking with the people gathered there. Martha, though, has things to do. Hosting this group was a lot of work: so much work, in fact, that she's missing out on the opportunity of spending time with her guests. Like Martha in this instance, you might get so caught up in all the things you have to do to make something happen that you miss out on the happening itself. We tend to turn hospitality into an obligation instead of seeing it for the opportunity that it really is. We get turned around and miss out on the good stuff. When Luke records that Martha was “distracted” with the service she was doing, the word that he uses would literally translate to “being dragged around.” How do we allow ourselves to be dragged around by all the expected activities that we're doing to be hospitable, while all the while missing out on sharing real hospitality? Is busy work keeping you distracted, anxious, and troubled? If so, you're not alone!

Jesus sees what Martha's going through. When she comes to him asking for his help in getting her sister Mary to lend a hand, Jesus turns Martha's attention from *obligation* to *opportunity*. Even though Martha has offered hospitality to Jesus and his disciples, **Jesus is the one who is welcoming her.** He is really the host in this story, because he's the one offering the most important and needed thing. Jesus has come to Bethany – to the world, in fact – to offer rest for the tired souls of this weary world and fellowship with God in to people who have been born strangers and aliens. Jesus' hospitality welcomes in the burdened and broken alike. As he teaches his hearers about God's love and design for life, Jesus calls their attention and ours to the “good portion:” the good stuff. Sitting at his feet, we get to hear about the unexpected gift of the hospitality of a God who gives Himself for us. Jesus' ultimate work of hospitality would be offered a few miles away from Bethany, when he stretched wide his arms on the cross to welcome humanity back to his Father and our Father. And now, we get to experience the feast that he brings out for us, food and drink better than anything that either Abraham or Martha could ever hope to provide: Jesus welcomes us as his guests to share his body and blood together in the fellowship that he makes possible. That's the really good stuff! And he has gone before us to prepare a place for all his guests, people

like Abraham and Martha and you and me, making everything ready for that time beyond time when everything that distracts, troubles, and drags us around will be gone for good. **Jesus knows hospitality!**

As we move through these weeks of summer and consider the signs of the Church, those actions and attitudes that reflect who we are and who God calls us to be as His people, let Jesus' hospitality shape your hospitality.

In order to welcome others, even the stranger, as our guest, we need to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to God's Word. It's all too easy for us to get our sights locked in on the obligation of hospitality: all the busy work that we do, even out of good intentions, to give the impression of being welcoming. Jesus calls us to rest from our busyness, though, and experience the reality of a God who welcomes us. In doing so, we learn how to see hospitality as an opportunity to show self-giving love to the world around us. As a congregation, how do you show hospitality to the people next to you in the pew? As a family, how do you show hospitality to your neighbors down the street or the homeless on the street? As a Christian, a member of the body of Christ, how do you show hospitality to the friend or the stranger who desperately needs the rest and refreshment that Jesus offers? He is our host, and we as the Church get to share his invitation to our world. That's the good portion, the good stuff. God welcomes you and them to be with Him as His guests.

Through Jesus, we *do* know hospitality.

Amen.