

July 17, 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

by [Michael Fick](#) in the [July 6, 2016](#) issue

Hospitality is not the exclusive domain of Christian communities. All cultures and religious communities have standards and norms, formal or informal, around hospitality, and these are constantly changing and evolving. Food, manner, and form all matter.

But hospitality is profoundly important within Christian communities, and much energy is spent trying to discern what constitutes a deep, holy practice of hospitality. This is more than cosmetic; hospitality in the most profound sense is the manifestation of inclusion and care. Human beings have a deep need to receive hospitality. And human beings reflect more fully the image of God when offering genuine hospitality to others.

God's recurring manifestation in matters of hospitality pops up explicitly in two of the lectionary texts for this week, though one could argue that the theme is woven into the very fabric of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Old Abraham has a new identity and a new direction, but assurances that he and Sarah are on the right track have become more difficult to discern in the heat of the Mamre day. When God manifests mysteriously in the personage of three weary travelers, Abraham and Sarah go above and beyond in their practice of hospitality.

The ancient, tent-portable red carpet rolls out—not only with what would have been expected (rest, washing, food, and drink), but with a relatively lavish version that reflects the best of the aged family's impulses in the presence of God. The weary faces of God in their midst are not just in grudging fellowship; they are feasting. And God delights in the feast.

Abraham is the gregarious face of festivities, but the God-travelers are well aware that what they are receiving comes also from the labors of Sarah in the tent. Everyone in that small community has been rallied to offer the best they have. The promise of blessing that follows goes beyond a transaction that brings reward. In the response of the ancient household, God perceives a future for humanity that reflects the very heart of the divine.

Fast-forward to Jesus' now familiar visit to the sisters Martha and Mary. The reality of God, present, as the subject of hospitality, is again in focus. The sisters respond in kind, each according to her gifts: Martha is making and doing; Mary is laser-focused on the presence of God in her midst. And though Jesus refuses to ask Mary to conform to Martha's standards of busy hospitality, neither does he indicate that the making and doing of hospitality are entirely beside the point. Jesus' response is less about shaming or devaluing Martha than it is about affirming Mary.

In both texts God's experience of hospitality—in the mysterious travelers and in the person of Jesus Christ—inspires us to think beyond an Abraham vs. Sarah or Martha vs. Mary divide when it comes to the holiness of profound hospitality. Provisioning is a piece of the calling: a community prepared to wash, feed, offer drink, and model the acceptance of real sabbath rest is central to our collective vocation. So is space and time for—and interest in—real and profound relationship.

It is artificial to divide individuals, communities, or even whole denominations and communions into Sarah/Abraham or Mary/Martha categories, tempting as it may be. *That's the sacramental church. That's the social-justice church. That community is a close-knit fellowship. Just about anything goes over there.* Such designations too neatly sort out those who “do” and those who are “present.”

The texts for this week ask of the Christian community a more profound exploration of just what it is we mean when we say we seek and practice hospitality. This is no tea-and-cookies conversation. Communities are stressed and sometimes divided over questions of hospitality and their implications.

At one extreme is the temptation to treat hospitality as a project. It can become a list to be completed, a set of tasks or a variety of actions that demonstrate purity of obedience, doctrine, or commitment to the cause. At the other extreme, communities can become so focused on preserving relationships inside the tent that those outside seeking refuge and sustenance are rarely or barely even noticed. In the former, communities risk turning people into the objects of service, without meaningful relationship. In the latter, the intensity of relationship can hide from the community the longings, needs, and even demands for justice of those not traditionally encamped in that particular gathering.

Christ, bearing the fullness of the mystery of God in human flesh, enters into the midst of our various households and embodies the holiness of both giving and

receiving hospitality. This is done in acts of both affirmation and, when necessary, redirection. Jesus both sets and attends the table. Jesus both anoints and is anointed, washes and is washed. Jesus both serves the disciples and empowers, even demands, their service.

Worry and distraction are the enemies of both meaningful action and attentive relationship. Perhaps this is where individuals and communities, churches and even denominations, can begin to sit at the feet of Christ and discern. By naming the worries and distractions that possess us, we can hope for the grace and freedom to receive and share Christ's hospitality in ways that transform us and invite the world into transformation.