

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 20, 2025

Genesis 18: 1-14

Colossians 1:21-29

Luke 10:38-42

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Anyone who visits the Middle East will notice the hospitality of the people. As suspicious as they are of each other, the Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel and the West Bank are generally warm and generous toward strangers. The expectation of hospitality is something that transcends thousands of years, religious conflict, ruling powers, and borders. My neighbor is a Muslim from the West Bank. He has made a good life for himself here, served in our military, became a citizen, works as a corrections officer, and is raising his family according to his tradition. Yet, as good as he acknowledges his life to be here, he longs for the community he had before coming to the U.S. I can see why. Not just because he is a stranger in a strange land here, but because I too find myself longing for the streets of Jerusalem and the deep roots of religion, history, politics, and culture available there. There is much to be said for a hospitable people in a very dangerous and difficult part of the world.

The story of Abraham from Genesis dates to around 2,000 B.C., over four thousand years ago. Any ancient hero of the region would be expected to show the appropriate enthusiasm for welcoming strangers. Abraham does just that. At least part of the context for Sodom and Gomorrah is how the visiting strangers were treated when they entered the city. Ezekiel writes that the sins of Sodom were arrogance, gluttony, and unconcern for the poor and the needy.¹ With this disregard for humanity, it is little wonder that objectification and sexual perversion accompanied their misdeeds. Abraham's actions in the story are in keeping with a cultural milieu, and destruction rained down on the cities that failed to exhibit the same level of welcome to strangers. Christians in America would do well to consider this warning for ourselves as we debate proper treatment of illegal immigrants.

The Bible is clear that love for the stranger, the foreigner, is to be part of our moral framework, even mentioning them along with widows and orphans as recipients of God's love and care.² While our current laws do not constitute an exact parallel to one's foreign status in the ancient world, the concept of love for the stranger is worth our consideration. We would not want to turn this into a question: "Who is my stranger?" in the manner of the young man who was confused as to who his neighbor was. We should not allow someone's immigration status to harden our hearts against their plight. The illegal alien was still born with inalienable rights. The illegal alien still has a moral claim on our care for them, if not our open hospitality.

¹ Ezekiel 16:49.

² Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:18.

Abraham was the first person in the Bible who is said to be called by God to serve a holy function. He was a stranger in a strange land, a wandering Aramean who settled in a foreign place. Sometimes to move forward, you must be willing to leave your comfort zone. Abraham is the father of a holy people, those called by God to live in righteousness that comes from faith in the promises of God. His generosity in response to his visitors is what faith in action looks like. He also stood in the breach when he found out that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were to be destroyed. He doesn't make the argument that most of the people are good, but that it is not God's way to punish the righteous with the wicked, to sweep up the good with the bad. This courageous intercession on the part of Abraham also tells us that God can handle and is content to deal with our own questions as we struggle with Him.

The story of Abraham and his hospitality gives us added insight into what Martha is up to when Jesus arrives at her home. As important as hospitality for strangers is in the Middle East, there is also an expectation of serving the needs of any guest in one's home. Martha had graciously opened her home to Jesus, and she wanted everything to be perfect for Him. In her distraction, however, she lost sight of exactly Who had come into her house. Jesus was there teaching, and Mary recognized that as the primary concern of the moment. When God speaks, we should listen.

We live in an age of distraction. Martha was tending to the need for food and drink; we are distracted by much less. The noise of existence is nearly constant as we inundate ourselves with the soundwaves of podcasts, radio, and TV. While there is much that is profane in all the noise, I am more troubled by what is missing from it. There is nothing holy in it – no holy space, no holy time, no holy words. It is an endless stream of the superficial, the manipulative, and a forced sameness. Conformity with some political views become the hallmark of most interactions, and even this is another distraction from the deeper questions of life. There is little joy in this pursuit of distraction, and yet, we continue to prioritize it. It is easier for us to be distracted than it is to be alone with our thoughts, alone with a great book, or alone with God's word. It is easier to be distracted by the noise than it is to learn about our neighbors, let alone to love them. And many are not even aware that the Bible expects us to love the stranger, but this is a law for us specifically stated in the Torah.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The statement implies that you are to love that which is closest to you. Your neighbor is close to you. Just as necessary is the command to love that which is not so close by, that which is strange to you, or different from you. I have heard the argument that "neighbor" is to be understood as everyone. This point is not even needed. You are explicitly told to love the stranger, to love the foreigner who is far away from you – far away from you in political views, far away from you in origin, far away from you in language, in culture, in religion, in social class, and in ethnicity. For us, this is not to be some dreamy, idealistic utopia. This is to be who we are and what we do.

Martha loved something quite foreign to her. Jesus, the very source of holiness, was a stranger in a strange land. Martha loved the Holy One of God. From my perspective, the distance between me and the Holy One of God is a long way, and I am not very good at loving what is

different from me. Martha loved the Stranger in a strange land and cared for Him with every action. What she didn't recognize was her own distance from Christ, and that it was His desire to serve her. While Martha was busy, worrying about the preparations she had prioritized, Mary sat listening to Jesus as He taught. For Martha, this was a display of inhospitality and carelessness. She even goes to Jesus, looking for Him to rectify the situation. This all too human reaction can often be found among us. We look for others to conform to our standards of what life with Jesus should look like. Somehow, we assume that we love the right way, and anyone who doesn't meet our expectations and standards must be doing it wrong. The ego drives us to see the primary thing is whatever thing we are prioritizing in that moment.

Jesus moves Martha toward a better way and a deeper truth. As beautiful as the social tradition of hospitality is, there is something even more beautiful: the hospitality of the One who has power over all that exists, and yet, deigns to serve man. His desire is to teach us through His word, and for us to turn away from distractions. We are to turn from what is shallow and lacking in holiness toward the source of holiness. As He teaches, we are to stay focused on Him and what He brings to us. The calm and simple Mary demonstrates a childlike faith in Christ. As easily distracted as children can be, there is a type of focus they have that is rarely experienced in adults. Catch their attention at the right time, and you can feel like they listen with a sense of awe, wonder, and rapt attention. Mary understood that the visitor was more than a stranger; He was divine, and she clung to every holy word that poured from His holy lips.

Before we dismiss Martha as somehow inferior to Mary, consider this: Mary and Martha are both the sublime reflection of what the Church should be, but the order of operations matters. The church is to be Christ in the world and Christ to the world. We can only do this if we are intentional in our love for others. Works of mercy are fundamental for any follower of Jesus. Still, equally fundamental, and of greater need is the act of sitting at Jesus' feet to receive what He alone can give. Martha's mistake was in putting things of secondary importance first. The church imitates Mary by gathering to listen to what Jesus has to say. Rejecting the vain distractions of the age, we sit in the quiet of the nave to hear the Word proclaimed. Setting aside the secondary chores of life for a time, knowing that His gifts of forgiveness and peace are the priority, we appear derelict to the world. Yet, here, we find life itself in Christ, in His Word, and in His presence.

The church also imitates Martha, serving Christ by serving those around us. First, Christ demonstrates for us what the greatest servant does. He welcomes us to the sanctuary, comforts us with His gospel, feeds us with a heavenly bounty, and gives us rest from the endless and meaningless noise. It is a hospitality which comes to us undeserved and unrepayable. Only after this reception of grace, with a conscience no longer bound by fear of punishment, are we able to serve others as Christ has served us. So, we walk in the footsteps of Martha after sitting in the seat of Mary, never forgetting the one thing needful.

I can't imagine anything more foreign to Christ, holy and righteous as He is, than me. And I am not even speaking in some self-deprecating way about my own moral shortcomings. I am

talking about the Lord of life, the Ruler of Creation, approaching me for any reason at all. He comes with the greatest hospitality imaginable. We were strangers to God, yet He loved us. He called us brothers and friends, and offered Himself so that we could share in His kingdom. We are called into His holy community where we find other strangers that we can love as He first loved us. And here, we learn what it is to love our neighbor as Christ loved us. Here we learn to love the stranger as Christ loved us. Here, we learn to love the One who was strange and far away, but Who went to the cross to draw us nearer to Him, to be His neighbors. He loved that which was farthest from Him, that which was strangest to Him. In turn, we are free to love our neighbor and the stranger, for that is our imitation of His hospitable way.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.