

Proper 11 – Year C (21 July 13)  
Genesis 18:1-10a  
Psalm 15  
Colossians 1:15-28  
Luke 10:38-42

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Today we find Abraham sitting under oak trees in the heat of the day. The Lord, disguised as three strangers, arrives, and Abraham welcomes them with water and washes their feet. Then, Abraham and Sarah offer them a generous meal of cakes from their finest flour, a prized calf, and curds and milk. It is a gesture of costly and boundless generosity to the stranger, and in it Abraham and Sarah find the Lord.

This story sounds like our gospel lesson from last week: the story of the Good Samaritan. In it the Samaritan showed mercy and hospitality to a robbed, beaten, and naked traveller. That story is strange but one could hardly describe the characters as strangers. Sure, the two may not have known each other, but Jews despised Samaritans, so while they kept their distance, the Jew was no stranger to the Samaritan. And in a radical twist Jesus used the Jewish-Samaritan tensions to display his command to love our neighbor, to love in a way that gives fully of ourselves—even at a steep personal cost.

This brings us to today's gospel lesson of Mary and Martha. This story of hospitality sounds similar to that of Abraham and Sarah, and to that of the Good Samaritan. Yet suddenly we've moved closer to home. In fact, we *are* home. But this time, what's strange has nothing to do with the people involved: these are not strangers emerging from the desert or strangers found on the side of the road. These people are gathered in a home, and are members of the same ethnic group. And Martha seems to follow in the footsteps of the Good Samaritan and Abraham and Sarah. What is strange is Jesus' words to Martha. She is following

exactly the pattern set forth by Abraham and Sarah to the strangers and the Good Samaritan to the traveller. Martha is working to hospitably welcome Jesus into her home! Is Martha not doing the right thing? Yet, when she asks for help as her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet, Jesus responds, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." What do we do with this?

We should be careful to not be too hard on Martha. Mary and Martha are often compared as choosing two different lifestyles, two different paths for serving the Lord. While one could make a case to give up distractions or work, and to simply love Jesus, we are in a danger of missing a broader point.

Jesus never said that Mary chose a better life, or a better path. Jesus said that Mary chose a better part—a *part*. In other words, Mary's actions are just a part of a larger whole...and so are Martha's.

This is not about who is right or who is wrong. In a sense they both are right. We should not discount Martha for being distracted or being a "busybody." Rather, if Mary has chosen the better part, Martha has a part too. They are participating in different parts of a larger whole, and both of those parts matter.

The question is not who has chosen right or wrong, but *what* are they a part of? Why does it matter?

This story of Mary and Martha seems ordinary enough. Martha is preparing the meal; Jesus is her guest. This sounds a lot like what we do each night: we cook, we eat, we talk to each other. We have control over who to invite, the menu, where to sit. This is very ordinary. But, as most things are when it comes to Jesus, what was ordinary is now strange.

Consider that the last thing Jesus does with his disciples is share a meal, one that appeared ordinary enough at the beginning. His words, though, must have sounded strange. Taking ordinary bread, Jesus said, "This is my Body, which is given for you." And ordinary wine, "This is my Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

This is strange.

Yet we do this every Sunday, too. It is ordinary: there is bread and there is wine. And yet, it's not ordinary anymore. Suddenly, it's extraordinary. And every *part* of it matters.

Sure, some days we are like Abraham and Sarah: people come here who have never been here, and we may never see them again. They may emerge from their desert roads in need of nourishment; and they kneel at the altar right next to us, and we share in the best Christ has to give.

But other days it may just be us. We come with our children, our parents, our friends; we know each other's names. Some of us even ate together during the week—perhaps eating bread and drink wine. And yet, it's different here. Here, we are friends, and we are strangers. We are rich and poor, young and old, able and disabled, Jews and gentiles. And what we can forget, is that here we are people who have no reason to be together were it not for this bread, and this cup.

The beauty of hospitality is that while the participants can change, the wholeness and holiness of it remains. Whether it's strangers on a desert road... or your economic oppressor... or you, your sister, and Jesus, the wholeness and holiness remains.

Remember that what we do is strange even when it feels ordinary. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus; Abraham bowed to the ground before the Lord; and we, too, will kneel at the altar to receive Christ, each of us acknowledging that in giving hospitality, we first receive.

To come and receive his body and blood, we are members of a larger whole, "the mystical body" of Christ. For in the Eucharist we are united in something as ordinary, and as strange, as bread and a cup of wine.

Amen.