

***Grace, Mercy, and Peace from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ.***

A few years ago my wife, Sara, and I went to the Midwest to visit family and attend a wedding. Since we were going to be within driving distance, we decided to make a few stops to see some old acquaintances. On the way out, we planned to stop in Chicago to see friends who had moved there from York, PA. And in addition we had contacted one of Sara's cross country team mates from college hoping to visit with her. The visits were very different in a way that seems pertinent to our Gospel reading this morning.

We planned a few extra days in Chicago, hoping to have time to relax and catch up with our friends from York. When we got there our friend Ruth immediately began apologizing for how the house wasn't clean enough, the futon bed was not soft enough, and on. As the three days progressed ***Ruth frantically busied herself being the good hostess***, trying to anticipate our every need to make our visit enjoyable – was the air-conditioning too hot? Too cold? Did we need a pillow behind our back? Were we thirsty? Etc. We kept reassuring her that we had traveled to enjoy their company, not their accommodations.

***At one point she got frustrated and complained to her husband that she was doing it all***, but he was just being a good host in his own way sitting with us and talking about our lives and what had happened to each of us in the preceding year or so.

***Our visit with Ruth and her husband ended up being stressful because although she was trying to be the good hostess, Sara and I were sad that Ruth was so distracted by all her perceived responsibilities, and because we sensed***

*that our visit was causing resentment in their house.* On top of which there never was that time to just relax with them and SHARE the blessing of being friends and companions.

We are still very much friends with Ruth and her husband, it's just that *on that particular visit Ruth's constant efforts to be hospitable made our visit feel like more of a burden than a blessing.* In fact, I would guess that when we finally got in the car to drive away Ruth was relieved to see us go on to see Sara's family, so that she could relax. We felt like a burden to Ruth and Marshall, *but we intended that our visit would bring joy to their lives.*

Following our visit with Sara's family we planned on attending a wedding in Northern Iowa. Sara was hoping that we would be able to connect with a cross country teammate from college. We made contact by phone, and Linda told us that she was headed home to Iowa City to see her parents for the weekend, but that she and her parents thought it would be great to have us come along.

Dr. and Mrs. Swenson sat and talked with us, remembering Sara from college, we sat at dinner and during the dinner conversation we shared opinions. No special plans were made for us, we just joined in with their lives while we were there. It happened to be Linda's younger sister's birthday, so we were asked to sing and have cake. We were included in their lives for the time we were there. *They truly were interested in us, and although we shared in their lives for less than 24 hours I felt edified, content and at peace. Indeed, I believe the Swenson's felt that way too. When we left we all seemed refreshed by the visit,* and the Swensons invited us back any time, with or without Linda.. A few week's later we

received a note from Linda's parents saying how much they enjoyed our visit and another open-ended invitation.

*We were the same people and somehow the posture of the people receiving us made all the difference in the world.*

Ruth's exaggerated sense of duty, defined by what she needed to provide, created an environment of resentment.

*The Swenson's openness to who we were in their midst allowed us to share our lives, creating a new and life-giving relationship.*

In our gospel reading this morning the story of *Martha and Mary* presents us with these same two very different approaches to hospitality.

Often this story has been interpreted as being about styles of discipleship: serving versus learning or being in Jesus presence, but such an interpretation oversimplifies what is a more profound message about hospitality from Jesus.

It is not Martha's busy-ness that causes Jesus to correct her, but rather ***HER CERTAINTY OF SELF-IMPORTANCE***. You see, *because Martha is so consumed with the importance of her role as hostess and what she can share, she loses sight of what Jesus has to share with her.* She seems convinced that her place in the story, and the most important thing in life is her contribution. *For Martha Jesus visitation has become about what she can offer Jesus, eclipsing what Jesus has to share with her.*

When you think about the fact that the Son of God, the messiah, the one who brings life and salvation has chosen to visit her home and she is aware only of the dinner preparations, *the absurdity becomes clear.*

***The fruits of her self-importance are distraction, resentment, and***

***frustration.*** Because in Martha's great wisdom her concern is only with what she has to offer, and therefore her frustration that everyone else isn't helping her, *she places herself outside the company of Jesus and the community that follows him. She knows best, and won't Jesus please just tell everyone, especially her lazy sister, that she is right, that she is doing what she is supposed to be doing, keeping busy, earning her keep, making things happen in the kitchen.* And *tell Mary that she has no business* just listening to Jesus. What does that accomplish?

But *Jesus doesn't say that.* He *doesn't confirm Martha's self-proclaimed wisdom and self-importance, nor does he confirm ours.* Instead he says this: 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.

*Jesus gently reminds* Martha that this work, this dinner and her role as hostess - *what seems so important to her in the moment -- will not produce any- thing enduring in her life.* Tomorrow morning all she would have for her way of living was dirty dishes, more work, and more resentment that she had to do it.

On the other hand, Mary's hospitality is opening herself to hear what this guest has to say. *She humbles herself in Jesus' presence, and is refreshed and strengthened in the life-giving word that this One who has entered her life has for her.* She sits at his feet being blessed by his life - giving presence. ***She wants to learn his wisdom, not her own.*** And she wants to share her questions, doubts, herself with him.

***The fruits of her devotion to Jesus are lasting and will not be taken***

away: peace, hope, and forgiveness. This is because the hope, peace, and forgiveness come from Jesus' abundant and eternal goodness, not her own. And they last because they are based on her deepening relationship with the giver of life.

*It's really quite absurd to think our labor is so vital in the presence of the one whose labor of love on the cross has won all creation back to the Father, buut we go there all the time.*

*The good news is that because of Christ's work we need not continue laboring for God's love since in him it has been freely given. The truth is what we want is to be more important than the details, tasks, and drudgery of daily life. When we offer ourselves as Mary did to listen and be with Jesus intentionally in prayer, the reading of God's Word, and in worship we also will experience the lasting blessings of intimacy, friendship, and having our spirits nourished which will flow freely from us in lives that are labors of love. **This is what Jesus means when He says, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."***

When I heard these words of Jesus to Martha, a person came to mind, Gert Lervold. Gert reached a point in her life when all the work and busy-ness of life was no longer required – in fact, outside the realm of realistic expectation; that part of life was taken away by age. **But Gert always and ever had her Bible and Jesus by her side, and she had Jesus' glowing love and acceptance for each of us.** She had chosen the better part and it was not taken away from her. In fact, it was given to all of us.

**AMEN !!!**