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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
7/18/2010, The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
Genesis 18:1-10a, Luke 10:38-42  
Martha's Hospitality

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>40</sup>But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. (Luke 10:40, KJV)

Just before this morning's story about Mary and Martha we have the lovely parable of the Good Samaritan. I bet you remember how that parable ends: Jesus says, "Go, and do thou likewise." (Luke 10:37, KJV) Now we see someone going and doing "likewise." Now we see a Good Samaritan at work, for we see Martha hastening around, taking care of Jesus. She does not labor for money, but simply from the goodness of her heart.

The problem is that she does not take time to listen to the one she is serving. It is as if Martha has hoisted the poor man up onto her donkey and is leading him to the inn, all the while failing to hear that the poor man is murmuring words of love to her. It is as if the love of her life has entered her home and is speaking words that could change her life henceforth, but she does not hear those words, she is so preoccupied with her work.

Martha is a rich character in this story. Let's consider her three times, using three Cs. She is *cumbered*, *commendable*, and *complaining*.

First, Martha was cumbered with much work. She was burdened, weighed down by her work. Some work is easy and can even lift the spirits, but this work troubles Martha. Some people whistle as they work, because they are rather joyful in their work. Martha does not seem joyful.

Martin Luther approved of the old saying, "He who works well, prays twice." That is, Luther believed that there are many kinds of priestly work needing to be done in this world, including the plain, old-fashioned work of hospitality. We can feel good about even lowly work if we do it with a prayer, offering it up to God as our sacrifice to him and to our neighbor. Sweeping the floor, baking the bread, taking care of others can be offered up to God as a form of love of him and of the neighbor. But Martha does not seem conscious of her work as a sacred ministry. She just seems put out by it.

In her defense, we could note that it is not easy to host Jesus, because Jesus does not come alone, but with his twelve disciples. Sometimes it seems that it is enough, and more than enough, to keep the home tidy and well-stocked just for us, just for the family members. Even more, it is a big deal when guests come, especially when thirteen men come with their grown-up appetites. Imagine simply the choreography of the kitchen, cooking for such a crew. Where are you going to

get enough pots and pans? Who has place settings and dinnerware for thirteen guests? Plus Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. That makes sixteen people, plus any others who came with Jesus. That's a lot of ice tea glasses to keep filled, to say nothing of the cost of all the groceries and the quick dashes to the store to get some more coffee and Half-and-Half and so on. The text says that Martha was cumbered with much work, and I can well believe it.

So, that is the first thing we can note about Martha. She is cumbered with much work.

Second, we should not fail to commend Martha for her hospitality. Hospitality! What a wonderful thing! During our recent vacation, Carol and I were treated to a tremendous amount of hospitality. We stayed with family and friends, and visited with many more friends – someone different just about every day. Needless to say we ate too much! We were treated to wonderful food and drink and conversation. Everywhere we went our friends seemed happy to extend themselves for our benefit, to welcome us into their homes and to provide a relaxing and leisurely opportunity to share our lives with each other. We truly felt wealthy and blessed by all the love and warmth we received. All in all it was a great vacation!

Hospitality! In very much the same way Abraham and Sarah in this morning's First Lesson welcomed their three visitors to their home in the desert. The desert wilderness is a harsh environment. You could probably walk for miles and miles in the heat of the sun with no shade in sight. Abraham takes one look at those three strangers and bids them to come and rest in the shade of a tree.. Then he rushes around to provide some food and drink – freshly baked cakes and a roasted lamb. It was not a short visit! Carol and I were welcomed by dear *friends* in every case; but Abraham welcomed strangers. His gracious hospitality was rewarded by a message from God as the visitors repeated God's promise that Abraham and Sarah would become parents of a son, even in their old age.

In this morning's Gospel story, Martha practices hospitality, and that is a good thing. This world needs hospitality. It is a practical form of love. Some people write poetry to express their love. Some people write songs. Martha prepares a meal. And that is a form of love many people in this world need. St. James once complained about people who talk a good story, but do not actually give much help in life:

<sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:15-17, RSV)

Well, Martha's faith is not dead. Martha's faith includes works -- good works helpful to others. So, that's the second thing to say about Martha. She should be commended for her hospitality.

But the last thing to say about Martha is that she complains, aye, and that her complaining should be resisted. Jesus resists the complaint of Martha, and I bet he

did so for two reasons. First, he is defending Mary, for Mary has indeed chosen the better part. She clings to the Word of God, and she should not be deprived of that. Same with any of us. Never hinder someone who is trying to draw closer to the Word of God. Indeed, do what you can to encourage them in that direction. They are choosing the better part. And the second reason Jesus resists Martha's complaint is for the sake of Martha herself. That is, in defending Mary, Jesus is at the same time appealing to Martha to come and join her sister in listening to him. It is as if Jesus is saying to Martha, "Martha, come join us. I am lonely without you. Life just isn't right without you near at hand. I care about you being close to me more than I care about the fine food you are preparing. I am grateful for your labors, but I would be even more grateful for your presence."

For, you see, Jesus is the true Good Samaritan, not Martha and all her labors. The true man of kindness is Jesus himself, and compared to him, both Mary and Martha are poor, waylaid victims of sin, death, and the devil. Jesus has come to this world to save Mary and Martha from sin, death, and the devil. Jesus has come to teach them the way of truth and of life, for he is the way, the truth, and the life. Altogether, Jesus is a man worth hearing. He really is. Some of us simply babble on and on, never really saying anything important. But Jesus says something worth hearing: "You are precious to me, Martha. This is my body, my blood, my very life which I lay down for you. I am determined that you should walk with me all the way into heaven. And the beginning point, Martha, is simply that you will listen to me, that you will heed my voice, that like a lamb of my flock you will hear the voice of your Good Shepherd."

My wife Carol, who is Chaplain of The Wartburg, recently told me about a conversation she had with a 90-year-old woman. At that moment, this dear woman was somewhat like Martha, worried and distracted by many things. As they talked, Carol reminded her of something she had often told her: that every morning she sings her favorite hymns and reads psalms from the hymnal she received way back when she was confirmed. The old lady thought about it for a minute and then she said, "Yes, I do that, every morning. And you know if I could only get those words to stay in here (pointing to her head and then her heart) it would sure help to give me some peace."

Well, Mary, bless her, is like this dear old woman. She is drawing close to the very Word of Life. She senses that she needs that Word. She needs it in her head and in her heart. She needs Jesus.

In the end, Jesus is the great host, even more so than Martha. He is the one who bids others to come to him and to find some rest. His words are wonderful, and they are meant for someone who is worn out with her work like Martha:

<sup>28</sup>Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30, RSV)

Mary sat at Jesus feet and listened to him. She had chosen the better part – the one thing needful! And it will never be taken away from her. Today I am recommending Mary’s choice to you, each and every one of you. If you come to Christ, he will in no wise cast you out.(John 6:37). You have commenced the coming to him already, for here you are in Church. But I say, let it continue. Seek Christ not only in Church, but throughout your work week. Read the Bible, sit at the feet of Jesus, walk in his ways, try to fetch others to him.

When the Bible is nearing its conclusion, in the book of Revelation, one of the last things we hear about Jesus is his delight in your company. He is always eager to come into your life and enjoy your hospitality:

<sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door, and knock : if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20, KJV)

Indeed, he is the true Host. His hospitality might cost him his life, his very body and blood, but he pays the cost in order that he might have a chance for conversation with you, as he is soon to converse with us with his words, “This is my body, this is my blood, for you!” To this great Host be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.