

Before we talk about Mary and Martha, I want to talk about Abraham. When Abraham looks up and sees these three strangers at his door, he does what is proper and expected in his culture: he invites them in for a meal and a rest. Such hospitality isn't something we Westerners practice, but in that part of the world, it's a very big deal, even today.

That Abraham invites his guests to stop and eat is not unusual; in fact, it would have been unusual if he hadn't. What *is* highly unusual is the amount of food Abraham prepares for his guests. "A little bread" ends up being 3 measures of flour's worth; that's about 7 *gallons* flour. Can you imagine how many loaves of bread that would make, let alone the small, flat cakes they would have eaten? On top of that, he also serves them cheese and an entire fatted calf. This is less a snack and more a smorgasbord. I'll bet there were even little umbrellas in the drinks.

Now, if you read the story as the narrator offers it, this might make sense, right? How else would one respond when God shows up on one's doorstep? But, if you pay attention, the story never says that Abraham recognizes that this is God. "He looked up and saw three men standing near him." I don't know about you, but when I see three men together, my first thought isn't, "I wonder if that's God." So, if Abraham didn't know these men were God, why did he offer them such extravagant hospitality? I'm left wondering if that's just who Abraham was, if he was the kind of guy that rolled out the red carpet for everyone. If so, the story thinks this is a virtue of his.

Which makes it all the more interesting to read this story alongside the story of Mary and Martha. The way we typically read that story, Martha is chastised by Jesus for doing the very thing that Abraham does: offering hospitality to God. How can we possibly understand Abraham's virtue to be Martha's vice?

Once again, I think the answer is in forgetting what we think we know about the story and paying close attention to what it actually says. St. Luke says that Martha complains to Jesus because she "was distracted by her many tasks." As I hear people talk about this story, we tend to think that the many tasks are the problem; that she shouldn't be so busy. What I hear is that the real problem is the fact that these tasks are distracting her; which makes me ask, "distracting her from what?"

I think Mary might actually help us answer that question. Mary, Luke says, is sitting at Jesus' feet. She's taken the position of a disciple. Lots of people—both men and women—listened to Jesus preach in the streets and the countrysides, but discipling—attaching oneself to a rabbi in order to study the Law—was traditionally a man's domain. While discipling was men's work,

women's work was more domestic: things like preparing food, hosting, entertaining guests—which is why Martha is upset. Maybe she's embarrassed that her sister has so flagrantly violated her gender role, but it seems to me that she's more upset that Mary isn't where she *should* be: helping in the kitchen.

This tells me that for Martha, providing hospitality isn't something she is doing because she wants to, but because it is expected of her. She has the same expectations of Mary, and when Mary doesn't meet them, she becomes exasperated. By contrast, Abraham provided an embarrassingly lavish spread for his guests that was not expected, which tells me that he did it not because it was expected, but because he wanted to, because it pleased him to show generosity to strangers. Martha's work doesn't please her; if it did, she wouldn't resent the lack of help.

While Martha is busy doing what she “should” be doing, Mary is doing what she shouldn't be doing. Why is that? What is it that presses her to violate the social norms that hold her sister so tightly, to embarrass herself and her family? I think the story is clear: if Jesus is in the living room, where else would she want to be?

As I read this story, it seems to me that while both Mary and Martha know who Jesus is, of the two, only Mary understands what that means. They both see somebody powerful, important, influential, but only Mary sees someone she wants to spend more time with. While it might be perfectly reasonable to want to show Jesus the kind of incredible hospitality that Abraham showed, that doesn't seem to be Martha's motivation. I wonder if Martha doesn't recognize God in her midst. I wonder if *that's* from what her many tasks are distracting her.

And that, I think, is something worthwhile for us to contemplate. Is it possible to be so busy in our many tasks for God's kingdom that we can fail to see God standing at our door, sitting in our living room, eating at our table? This story hits home for me because I am frequently and consistently distracted by my job as a pastor from recognizing God in my presence. Committee meetings, sermon deadlines, pastoral care calls... I get so lost in the business of the church that I often forget to think about why I am doing these things, what they mean. I have to intentionally practice mindfulness to call my attention back to the bigger picture, to remind myself of what God is doing here rather than getting lost in what I have to do or should do or would like to do or haven't done.

And I think see that happening to us as a community, as well. I wonder if we as a congregation throw ourselves into our ministry because of a feeling of obligation or responsibility

or tradition, with little thought to why we are here doing these things. Service ministries, congregational meetings, committees and volunteer work... we do it with gusto, but why? Maybe I'm completely out of line and only projecting my own challenges onto the rest of us, but I can say with complete honesty that I can count on my hands the number of times I've heard God mentioned inside this building outside of Sundays in the past seven years. It leads me to wonder: are we also distracted by our many tasks?

I don't offer this as a criticism, and I certainly am not pointing fingers; I'm just as guilty as anyone. Rather, I point this out because I wonder if this is part of what is making us so anxious. I don't think it's news to anyone that life at Agnus Dei is simply a bit more stressful these days than it has been in the past. COVID has not helped this, but it's not entirely to blame, either. As I ponder this stress and anxiety, I wonder if it comes from a fear that, even with as much as we're doing, we are not doing enough, and we're not doing it well enough.

I hear this fear in the way we talk about programs and mission and our budget. I hear it in the way we discuss our future; the veiled threat that, if we don't grow, we will die. We want to see a full sanctuary and vibrant programs—especially kids' programs—to feel like we're being successful. I wonder if, with how hard we work at community service or social justice, there isn't a part of us that is trying to justify ourselves to the world, to convince others—and maybe even ourselves—that this congregation is worth the time and resources we dedicate to it. What I notice, though, is that this world, along with all its measures of success—attendance and financial stability and growth—is a world that we believe needs to be saved because it condemns itself. Is that the world we want setting our expectations, telling us what we should be doing?

If congregations exist to gather people around the presence of God, to sit at the feet of Christ, I wonder if we are letting ourselves do that, or if we are instead busying ourselves in the kitchen because we feel like that's what we should be doing. It makes me wonder: do we really believe that sitting at Jesus' feet is where we belong? Or do we believe that is for other, better, more qualified people than us? Do we really believe that Jesus himself has called us to follow, to be disciples, to sit with him?

When Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better part, I don't hear him rebuking Martha, I hear him reassuring her that she, too, belongs with him, not hidden in the kitchen. The food will get prepared, the house made, the laundry done—all in good time. What she needs to hear in that moment is that, she, too, belongs at Jesus' feet; she, too, is held together with all things in him.

Her place—our place—is with Christ, and there is nothing that we can do or fail to do that will change that.

I notice that Abraham's love for his visitors seems to precede his realization of God's presence. As I look out at this community, I wonder if we show ourselves the kind of love we are so busy showing others, if we treat ourselves with the tenderness and grace that we would offer to anyone else, might we also find God here, in and among ourselves?

The letter to the Colossians says that Jesus is the One through whom and for whom all things have been created, the One in whom all things hold together. This means that this One alone is the source of our worth and value. There is nothing else that is needed. Does our work distract us from this truth, or proclaim it?

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