

**Message – July 17-18, 2010**  
**Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-41**  
**Hospitality**  
**Hillary T. West**

Several years ago, a young friend, far away from home, was living in Richmond and studying at MCV. She happened to fall in love with her genetics professor. They decided to marry. And, as she is from Ireland and he's from Australia, they really didn't have family here to host their wedding. So, we offered to serve as their surrogate family. We held their wedding reception in our home.

It wasn't a large wedding, about 50 people or so. But, because they were so far away from home, we wanted to do it just right, and make this their most memorable day ever in the United States.

So, first, we spruced up the garden and trimmed and weeded and put down mulch. Inside, we scrubbed and scrubbed where we probably wouldn't have scrubbed otherwise. We polished and rubbed and shined silver and china and crystal. We ironed table cloths and napkins. We snapped fresh flowers from the garden, treated them and arranged them into beautiful centerpieces to show that even Americans know a little something about flowers.

Then we started on the food. Naturally, we wanted to have food that reminded our ex-patriots of home. They're lovers of meat and potatoes. We cooked tenderloin of beef and sliced it paper thin, so it could wrap around a fork in bite size pieces. We cleaned and chopped and diced and cooked pounds of potatoes and spooned them into a thick, tasty cream sauces and cheese sauces. We trimmed asparagus and blanched them al dente and colored them up with bits of diced pimento. We tossed up a fresh green salad after washing and spin drying hand picked greens torn into small pieces. Finally, something got in my head to make the wedding cake! What was I thinking!? Well, needless to say, it was the most beautiful wedding cake ever; a layer of chocolate, a layer of yellow, a layer of white with fresh strawberries, beautifully decorated with a hand whipped icing and finished off with dainty edible marigolds, nasturtiums and pansies.

The table looked perfect and so did the house. Then, we all rushed off downtown to the wedding only to rush back to have the house open to receive guests. It was a glorious afternoon and people visited and stayed and shared stories. And, because the couple was not honeymooning, no one was in a hurry to leave. Food and drink continued to flow well into the evening.

What I remember most about the memorable afternoon was the sun streaming through the windows, all the doors flung open wide and people flowing from room to room, and out into the garden, celebrating the union of this happily, newly married couple and enjoying the feast.

What I also remember is at one point sneaking across the street to my dear friend and neighbor to just sit and breath. She said something like, "Hillary, you look exhausted. Are you having any fun at all?" Fun, I wasn't sure if I was having fun. What I was doing, I thought, was offering hospitality.

Hospitality stems from the same Latin root as hospital. Hospitality is about protecting the stranger, taking care of the guest. In Jesus' time, hospitality was a carefully structured, observed obligation. Shelter, clothing, food and drink are provided,

along with foot washing for the stranger, making him a guest, even before asking his or her name. Jesus, on his journey to Jerusalem, is the recipient of two kinds of hospitality.

He arrives in Bethany just two miles south east of Jerusalem to visit at the home of his dear friends, Mary and Martha, sisters to Lazarus. While Luke's gospel doesn't tell us this information, we learn in John's gospel that it's Lazarus whom Jesus raises from the dead.

Martha, with the best of intentions has worked herself into a frenzy to provide Jesus with the most gracious hospitality. Mary, by contrast, has a different understanding of hospitality. Getting as close as possible, right in his space, Mary, sits down at Jesus' feet.

This isn't causal chit chat she and Jesus are having. This is Jesus proclaiming the saving grace and mercy of God; Jesus teaching about how it is to live out the great commandment, to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. Mary's giving Jesus all she's got here and Martha's not one bit happy about it.

Hospitality is attending to the needs of the one present. As hosts, our job is to help our guests feel our efforts are effortless. For Martha, she's a gracious host, attending to Jesus' needs; working hard to provide him with comfort, providing him with the customary gifts of lavish meals, a home. Sometimes in our desire to serve, we lose sight of truly attending.

It's not Martha's busi-ness that overwhelms her. Rather, it's her loss of rhythm. Martha is so distracted by her busi-ness she's not able to extend the hospitality Jesus truly desires; to be present to receive the gift of his mercy, his love, his most Holy Word. When we get distracted, we can't be present, for anything, much less Jesus.

Brother Lawrence, at age 18, devoting his life to the love of God, was charged with the Martha job at the monastery. Brother Lawrence's job was endless, constant kitchen work, his least favorite of all chores; perhaps because he thought he was least equipped to do the work of preparing for the welcoming of others.

Somewhere along the line, Brother Lawrence decided to concentrate on the gift of hospitality. Every chore in the noisy kitchen from scrubbing pots and pans, to tending the fire, to hauling the water, to chopping and dicing and frying and baking, became a holy time, a time of prayer as tranquil as his times of quiet stillness in worship.

Martha complains to Jesus that she's left to do all the "work". The word for work is diakonia, which, in the Greek means, service. Service is what we do in our actions when we choose to follow Jesus; we minister to one another, caring for one another's needs in the name of the Lord. Jesus reminds us that in serving, we're disciples, leaders for the carving of the kingdom.

Jesus isn't chastising Martha for serving with such dedication. He's simply reminding Martha that she need not be worried. Worry and anxiety simply debilitate us in our discipleship.

Mary, has chosen the better part, to shape her her habits into the rhythm of constant thanksgiving and response to God in her life. Mary, at the feet of Jesus, is worshipping.

Benedict of Nursia, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century formed a rule of life for worshipping God. First, he said, we're to listen. Not to cease work. In fact, Benedict has formed an entire rule of life based on work. But to, listen for how God moves and has his being in all that

we do. After some time, may we find that our work is about a rhythm of life in response to God's love in our life; rather than some self inflicted task we've imposed upon ourselves to prove something.

Mary practices a hospitality of holy listening; one that brings us alive in Christ.

Author Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove tells of a time when he scheduled too much on his calendar; something we all plague ourselves with at one time or another. So, he rose very early one morning, before his young family awoke, to work on his message to teach later that day. As the sun rose and he, uninterrupted, busily toiled away, he thought it best to check his calendar. He looked to see that at noon that some folks were coming in town to visit with Wilson-Hartgrove and spend time learning about the modern monastic community he co-founded. As the morning grew into the noon hour, Wilson-Hartgrove worried that he still had hours to go on his message and his class to teach at 1:00 p.m. He hoped the visitors had forgotten about the visit. As the clock ticked and noon time came, no visitors. Wilson-Hartgrove gave thanks for their forgetfulness. Then at ten past 12, the door bell rang. His guests had arrived. Wilson-Hartgrove begrudgingly shifting gears, greeted his guests, explaining right away that he had a class to teach in an hour, and he was not fully prepared. He put together a quick lunch with the hopes that the visit would be brief. As they settled down to eat the customary meal the conversation began to flow. An hour quickly sped by. His kind guests reminded Wilson-Hartgrove that they would depart as he needed to teach a class. Wilson-Hartgrove smiled at his guests, and laughed at himself remembering that, if we will allow ourselves to just stay put for a bit, the Lord will surprise us and work wonders in us.

So, this week as we practice hospitality, whether in our business or in our stillness, may we be transformed by Jesus' gift of hospitality. Hospitality is a two way street. Hospitality is reciprocal. Jesus needs for us to choose the better part; to choose him; to follow him and to receive the gift of his generous, patient love, his gentle listening, his constant presence with us always.