

“The Spirit of Hospitality”

July 20, 2025

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Pentecost 6

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. Today’s gospel story is a familiar one; Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha. Unfortunately for women named Martha, it is also a story that has traditionally been used to admonish people. Jesus seems to praise Mary for her attention to Jesus and to find disappointment with Martha, and her anxiety. Our own Pastor Martha, who recently served St. John Hoernerstown, has a similar story. She was raised Catholic and has a sister named Mary. She confirms that this story was used to stereotype her and her sister, and to compare one child to the other. But I don’t believe the Gospel writer Luke intended this story to be used in a harsh manner. What Luke reveals to us is that hospitality can come in many forms.

This story is only a problem if we interpret it to mean that Mary’s actions were more valuable or more correct than Martha’s. But I don’t believe that is the case. I believe that our *intention* to serve the Lord as well as our *attention* to the Lord are equally important. We can be both hearers of the Word and doers of the Word. In a way, the difference can be compared to the difference between a Deacon’s calling and a pastor’s calling. I have been called to Word and Sacrament and Deacons like Kate Smith and Marianne Brock (who will preach for me next Sunday) are called to Word and Service. I am called to preach and teach and administer the Sacraments. Deacons are called to serve and to teach, which Kate did primarily through the Parsonage Ministry, her teaching, and in her chaplaincy duties. We both end up at the same place...at the foot of the cross, hoping to spread the good news to the world. Our Lutheran heritage also acknowledges that each one of us has a unique calling to serve the Lord.

I like how this gospel story is paired with the Genesis story of Abraham and his hospitality. Notice how Abraham’s busy nature does not result in rebuke from God; in fact, his hospitality and care is rewarded. Abraham welcomes guests into his tent in the heat of the day and he immediately gets to work. He runs to meet them, he hastens into the tent to tell Sarah to quickly prepare flour cakes, he runs to the herd to take a calf, and then he hastens to prepare the calf for the guests. Finally, at the end of the story, we hear that Abraham receives a reward—and don’t tell me that he wasn’t anxious and distracted like Martha! He surely was, out of concern for his guests. The mysterious guest blesses Abraham before he departs. The guest announces that he will be back and that Sarah, whom Abraham knows is barren, will give birth to a son. And yes, the rest of the story is not included in our bulletin, but I included it on our announcements page. Sarah laughs when she hears that she will bear a child, even though *it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women*, in other words, she was post-menopausal. You can study that part of the story at home.

To me, these stories are examples of the many different ways we show hospitality to God and to our neighbors. Just as Martha and Abraham get to work preparing food and lodging, Christians are called to do the same. For example, we have a lot of feeding ministries in our Harrisburg Conference that you might not know about. I did an informal survey with my colleagues and you might be surprised at the amount of feeding programs that we sponsor. At least half of our churches offer regular breakfast meals and evening meals to the community. Some of our churches even offer weekly or monthly take-out meals for anyone who wants one. St. Peter in

Middletown offers a weekly meal in which they serve 80 people. They also provide lunch every week day for the summer youth program in conjunction with the schools. For that, they serve 125 meals a week. And, of course, you know about the Hummelstown and Hershey Food Pantries. Feeding programs are an easy way to connect with the community, and to share a resource that everyone needs. What resource is that? Food of course, but the answer I was looking for is “love.”

Any time that a stranger is welcomed, Jesus is there. As Christians, we make it our mission to show hospitality. We welcome others because God first welcomed us. We hear over and over in Scripture how Jesus welcomes the outsider, the outcast, the marginalized, and those that society has labeled as “untouchable.” This is also the job of churches, although, let’s be honest, not all churches will welcome all people. Am I right? But don’t worry; this church will welcome everyone. We have a sign outside that says that “This is Christ’s Church: You Are Welcome Here.” It’s been there for several years and no one has messed with it.

Our second reading from Colossians gives us some good news to consider. In this very theological and philosophical reading, we hear how *God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross*. We hear how Jesus was willing to give his own life in order to save ours. We hear that we have been saved from ourselves. We hear how we are presented holy and blameless before God for the things that we cannot change, include our prejudices and our mistrust of others. But we have to remain steadfast in the faith. And that’s not always easy. That’s why we will always need to confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.

We live in a time where the Culture Wars pit us against one another and we find it hard to trust people. But we must trust that God is leading us and inspiring us to live lives that honor one another and ourselves. This is part of the hospitality that Jesus modeled for us. You know that famous quotation that is credited to the Mahatma Ghandi, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” With steadfast faith, we can be the change. We can show how to welcome by inviting others into our lives. We can show that we are not afraid of strangers by opening our doors. We will do just that when we open our doors for the next Election Day Soup Sale. Of course, the coffee will be free. And the conversation and fellowship will be priceless. Our Election Day Soup Sale shows the community that our doors and our hearts are open. Without hospitality and the willingness to reach out to our neighbors, our Christian ministry would be in vain. **Amen.**