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“Entertaining Jesus”
A sermon by Jonathan Nelson

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)
July 21, 2013
Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

I pride myself on attending to the guests in my home.

When my wife Christina and I have guests, I go through somewhat of a mental checklist:
Prior to arrival: think about guest’s musical tastes in order to provide an atmosphere.
Arrival: greet said guests with a hug or handshake.
During the stay: a beverage should always be in hand, the food always in excess.
Tell funny stories, or tell stories funnily.
Tell interesting stories, or tell stories interestingly.
Note the mood: is discussion waning? How about that YouTube video I saw this morning?
Warm enough? Toss a blanket their way.

You see how attentive I am? I have much to think about and much to do.
I am a good host.

Our Gospel lesson today is about being attentive to guests.
As Bible scholar Luke Johnson notes, it is about hospitality.¹
You’ve probably heard the tale before:
Our brother Jesus has set towards Jerusalem
where he will confront angry religious leaders and impatient Romans,
and if that isn’t enough,
the powers of Sin and Death on the rocks of Golgotha.
But on his way, he stops over at a nameless village
and becomes the guest in the home of two sisters: Mary and Martha.

¹ I am indebted to Luke Timothy Johnson for the idea of hospitality as “paying attention.”

Upon welcoming Jesus, Martha sets about the tasks of attending to her honored guest.
Her guest is the famed prophet, healer, and miracle-worker,
a man who recently managed to feed five thousand from five loaves and two fish.

So, Martha... no pressure.

Okay, Martha thinks, Mary will entertain him for the time being.

Meanwhile, I will get the record player set up and ponder over my stack of records.

Bach? Mozart? He does tell stories like Coltrane plays that sax...

Ok, he's got a glass of water, a couple more sips and he'll need another.

Remember to ask him his opinion about the editorial in last week's *Samaritan Times*.

Food's on the way.

Wait.

It looks like he needs a fresh towel and his feet need a good washing.

I think I can do that before the bread burns.

But Mary is just sitting there.

Can't she excuse herself for a minute?

Yea, she's indulging Jesus,

but it's clear he needs to be cleaned up, fed, and given some rest.

Can't they see I could use some help?

There is so much to do.

I kinda thought Jesus would notice that I'm so busy attending to his every need.

Instead, he keeps talking about the kingdom of God,

some Son of Man,

loving enemies,

and telling strange stories about farmers,

lamps,

and Samaritans.

And there's Mary, sitting at his feet like it's kindergarten story time!

If you've heard this story before—

in Sunday school or during worship—

you've probably been told that you are like Martha.

You have a lot of things that distract you, that concern you.

There are a billion things to worry about, and Jesus just wants you to be still and listen.

He just wants you to be like Mary.

Throughout the history of Christian proclamation,
this is the story that praises stillness over activity,
devotional exercises over the need to be busy and productive,
being over doing.

And rightfully so. As Jesus tells Martha, put first things first: listen.

Be *and then* do.

Read the Bible behind closed doors, pray early in the morning.

Then go about your daily activities.

Now, don't get me wrong, I am not knocking this interpretation of our story.

Indeed, we need to learn this lesson on a daily basis.

However, when we jump to the conclusion that we must be more like pious Mary rather than preoccupied Martha, we often miss a great question this text asks of us:

What does it mean to be attentive to Jesus as a guest?

What does it mean to entertain Jesus?

When we try to answer this question, we discover that the story of Mary and Martha's hospitality teaches us about our own hospitality.

According to our Gospel writer, Luke, Jesus is a guest who really wants to be heard.

Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus preaches and teaches in the synagogues. From there, he takes to lakeshores, plains, and mountainsides.

"Let anyone who has ears to hear listen," he beckons.

Jesus says that his people "are those who hear the word of God and do it."

Luke repeatedly tells us that Jesus is a preacher and teacher of the word of God.

Jesus really wants his word to be heard.

When Jesus walks through Mary and Martha's door,

they ask themselves: how can we be hospitable to this preaching teacher?

For the cardinal rule of hospitality is: pay attention to the guest.

Martha knows this rule;

it is the foundation of her role as a female in the first century.

This is why Martha gets so anxious/worried/distracted.

She has been defined by how well she attends to her guests.

Yet when our preaching traveler is the guest in Martha's home,

he will not let her be defined by how she *attends* to him,

but by how *attentive* she is to his word.

You see, when Jesus comes to town preaching and teaching of a coming kingdom,
he calls Mary and Martha into a whole new world.
They are no longer only valued by their service.
According to Jesus, they are disciples.
As disciples they are to listen to Jesus' word of blessing, love, reconciliation, and mercy.
They are to listen to the word of God.
In listening to this word,
they hear that they are not the worth of their deeds.
They are worth more than their service; they are children of God.
That is why Jesus calls Martha to quit attending and be attentive like Mary.
Mary is the one paying attention in this story. She is the hospitable one.
Mary has ears to listen to our brother Jesus, the Preacher and Teacher of the word of God.
While Martha is anxiously attending to her guest,
Mary is paying attention to who this guest really is.
Through paying attention to her guest—through being hospitable—Mary is changed.
And Jesus wants the same for Martha.
So, if hospitality is being attentive to the guest,
I suppose Martha and I aren't very good hosts after all.
I suppose we ought to be attentive to the real blessing of our guests.

During the sixth-century, in the middle of war-torn Italy, the abbot, St. Benedict, instructed the monks of his monasteries:

“Let all guests who come be received as Christ would be,
because he will say, ‘I was a stranger and ye took me in...’
By bowed head, or body prostrate on the ground,
all shall adore Christ in them, who indeed, is received in their persons.”

Benedict understood the enduring significance of Luke's story of Martha and Mary.

All our guests—whether in our homes, neighborhoods, or churches—
should be welcomed as Mary welcomed Jesus,
adored as Mary adored Jesus.

Benedict encourages us to be attentive to the Christ in and among us—
with open ears, minds, hearts, and hands.

He tells his monks, and now us:

show hospitality to strangers because in doing so, you are entertaining Jesus.

Not only did first century households along Jesus' path need to learn from Mary's
hospitality,
but also homes in 6th century Italy,
homes in 21st century Durham,
and in this home: First Presbyterian Church.

As we heard earlier,
the writer of Colossians tells us that one of the great mysteries of our faith is:

Christ in you.

Jesus Christ, our foundation, our beginning, the source of all wisdom and knowledge,
is in you.

In you.

Jesus Christ is present in the Church as a whole and in every individual Christian.
Not just back then and there in Martha and Mary's house,
but also here, near, now.

As the great reformer, Martin Luther, so aptly states,
"When he was on earth, he was far away from us here.
Now that he is far from earth, he is near to us."

Or so the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, states the case:

"Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs,

and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of men's [and women's] faces."

The risen Christ is near us, with us, in us.

We entertain Jesus in our midst.

I'm not sure you've got it... actually I'm not so sure I've got it myself!

So I will say it again.

The risen Christ is in you!

In you as you come into this home and go into another.

In that person next to you, over a pew, and the one in front of you.

Jesus Christ is in you!

As you greet one another for the first or hundredth time.

In that person in the parking lot, yea, the one we tried to avoid eye contact with.

Yes, Jesus is in you!

So receive, welcome, pay attention to one another as Jesus Christ.

As Mary was hospitable to Jesus, be hospitable to Christ in one another!

If the wandering Jesus that Mary and Martha welcomed is among us and in us here in
Durham

at this household we call First Presbyterian Church,

what does it mean for us to be hospitable?

What does it mean to be attentive to Jesus, our beloved guest?

Well, it means that we will sometimes be hosts and sometimes guests—

as Diana Butler Bass notes in her study of neighborhood churches like ours.

We are hospitable hosts when we pay attention to Christ in those who step through our doors.

We are guests when we are embraced by this community week in and week out.

We are hosts when we are attentive to joys and concerns and respond with love and mercy.

We are guests when our sisters and brothers hear our joys and concerns—
with ears and hands and feet.

Sometimes we are hosts—attentive to the Christ in and among us.

Sometimes we are guests—receiving the loving attention of Christ in another.

Always we are entertaining Jesus in our midst.

A number of years ago,

I was blessed to catch a glimpse of what it means to entertain Jesus.

I was working at a Christian mission that housed homeless and recently released prisoners.

One day, a parole officer brought Jim to our house.

Jim had served a number of years in prison for a sex offense.

Freed from the parameters of his prison cell,

Jim now faced life within the parameters of his parole.

He was not the least bit ready for his new home of 50-plus brothers.

That much was written on his face.

But his brothers received him as Christ, as Benedict would say.

They welcomed him,

listened to his worries,

and comforted him in spirit and with amenities.

A good dose of this hospitality and a whole lot of the Gospel began to wear off on Jim.

His sunken features began lifting.

It was as if Jim was turning into a different man.

What I was seeing was Jim becoming a host of Christ's presence.

Being the recipient of Christian hospitality

changed him into a hospitable Christian.

Jim set about making the dorms the best home for his brothers.

And before you got worried he was getting a bit too anxious about this task,
you would see and hear him being attentive to the joys and concerns of his brothers.

I think this is because Jim—whether he knew it or not—took that whole Christ *in* you seriously.

Jim was entertaining Jesus.

He was entertaining Jesus in the home of the homeless.

In the words of our Lord, “Go and do likewise.”

Jonathan Nelson is from Bolton, Massachusetts. He is married to Christina Nelson, an elementary school teacher and member of FPC. Jon received his BA in Print Journalism at Anderson University in Indiana. He worked as a men's program director at a homeless shelter before pursuing seminary education at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he received his MDiv in 2012. He is currently finishing a Masters of Theology at Duke Divinity School and is a candidate for ordination in the PC(USA).

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