

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We had ten people out at Riggs Beer Company in Urbana this past Thursday evening for Pub Theology. The idea behind Pub Theology is to get together and enjoy each other's company, but also to spend some time talking about topics related to our faith, the kind of conversations we don't usually tend to have, even with our fellow church members. The topic this time was how to address complex moral issues as people of faith, and we used excerpts from the ELCA's Social Statement on Abortion, which I mentioned in my sermon the Sunday after the recent Supreme Court decision overturning Roe-versus-Wade. We had good discussions at both ends of the table, and if nothing else, we were reminded that complex moral issues really are complex and don't lend themselves to easy answers. But we had some time to wrestle with one such issue with the guidance of our national church body. This coming Tuesday there will be another gathering of Grace folks, this time by Faith Circle for a discussion of a book entitled, "Freeing Jesus." More information on that later in the announcements. But both of these gatherings have at least a little in common with our readings today, especially our first and Gospel readings, which have groups of people gathering for meals, and in the midst of which gatherings God is present and speaking God's promise to God's people.

I want to hit four things in these readings that I then want to connect back to us as a congregation as both guidance and encouragement for the work of the church in this place.

First, I want to reemphasize the importance of hospitality in the ancient world. A few weeks ago, we had a Gospel reading in which Jesus send out disciples ahead of him to make arrangements for himself and his followers, and I talked then about what it meant to be received by a village, or not received. I said that hospitality was a very important value in the ancient world, as it still is in many traditional societies around the world today, because people were much less independent of each other, and travelers depended upon the hospitality of the people of the towns and villages they passed through. Now there was probably some kind of payment, or giving of gifts that happened in return, and which was part of the arrangements that Jesus' disciples were sent to make, but hosting travelers still required a significant outlay of work and resources for those who were willing to take that task on. And as I said a few weeks ago, being received into a villager's home for the night meant protection from bandits and wild animals that were a real threat to life and limb in those days. So, hospitality is not just a matter of politeness or good manners here. It is a primary way of fulfilling God's commandment to love one's neighbor.

Next I want to look at each of these stories, from Genesis and from Luke, to see how they affect the participants and prepare them for what comes next. In the Genesis story we learn right at the very beginning that this is an encounter with God. "The Lord appeared to Abraham," the text says, and then three guys show up. And it seems like they might just keep going, pass right on by, because Abraham begs them not to. He promises them water, food, and rest, and the men agree to stop. So then he rushes around to put together a feast for his guests. He gets Sarah to start baking with their best flour and has his servants prepare a choice calf from his flock. This is hospitality at its finest, the fanciest of meals for complete strangers! And it is in the course of this meal that the long-awaited fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham long ago finally has a timeline. By next year he and Sarah *will* have a child. God has at last shown up. There *will* be a child. They *will* become a great nation. God is faithful!

The reading from Luke, the story of Mary and Martha, also features a feast. It doesn't say so as explicitly as the Genesis story, but I think it's safe to assume from Martha's busy-ness, and from Jesus' comment that "only one thing is necessary." This could also mean that only a little is necessary, or only a few things. And in fact some ancient manuscript versions of this verse insert the words "few things." In other words, Jesus was telling Martha that it wasn't necessary to burden herself with a big, fancy meal. They needed only a little food to sustain them for their continued journey. But Jesus is also saying here that Martha is missing out on something more important than lavish hospitality, as important as hospitality is. This can strike us, on first reading, as maybe a little unfair of Jesus. Martha was doing what was expected of her in this culture as the host. She was following the rules, and her sister Mary was slacking. But I think we understand this story better if we put it into the context of this part of Luke's Gospel that we've been reading from. Jesus is challenging cultural norms left and right for a higher purpose. Those who wanted to go bury their dead or even just bid farewell to their families before following Jesus were told that they were "unfit for the Kingdom of Heaven." Family duty, Jesus suggests, can get in the way of God's mission. This is not to say that Jesus thinks we *shouldn't* take care of our families. Of course not. It's placing our families above all other people that is the problem. So that's one thing that helps us understand what's happening here. Another is remembering that the places Jesus visited on his way to Jerusalem had advanced warning of his arrival. This means that Martha was not caught by surprise here, so that she had to suddenly rush around to make preparations for her guests. It's entirely possible that she had been preparing for some time, and that Mary had helped her in that preparation, because of course she would, as a member of the household. But now that Jesus had arrived, Mary chose to let that preparation be enough and to listen to what Jesus had to say. And I haven't even mentioned yet the other cultural norm that is being broken here. In sitting at Jesus' feet like a disciple, Mary was doing something that was reserved for men in this culture. That might also be why Martha was upset. If all of this is the case, then what Jesus is saying here to Martha is, "let's focus on what's really important. Let's not miss the forest for the trees."

The final thing to note here in both of these stories, of Abraham and Sarah and of Mary and Martha, is how the tables get turned on the hosts. It turns out, in both of these cases, that God provides them with something much more consequential than what they provide their guests. In both cases, *God* has become the host, and *they* the recipients of *God's* hospitality. And this, of course, is the connection to us and our gatherings as the church – first and foremost in our gatherings around the word and the meal each Sunday, but also in gatherings like Pub Theology and Faith Circle, or like On The Way or Sunday School. When we gather in Jesus' name, whether that gathering is elaborate and fancy like Abraham's feast or one of our festival worship services, or whether it is plain and simple, like what Jesus suggests to Martha, or our meetings to talk about faith over a drink or a book or Bible study – when we gather in Jesus's name, Jesus has promised to be present. And when Jesus is present, we will find that he is in fact the host, who provides us with much more than we provide him.

This is our reason for being as the church, to be encountered by God in Jesus Christ, to have our cultural assumptions and our self-serving agendas challenged and broken down, so that we might be changed, transformed into partners in God's mission of liberation from the powers of sin, death, and evil, liberation that is for all people. That transformation will sometimes be slow, painful, and uneven. But we have the promise that it is God's work among us in here in this place and in our daily lives. May that be our mission and our focus. May our eyes and hearts be opened to trust that promise. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.