

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, July 18, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 18:1-10a; Psalm 15;
Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

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

Two weeks ago, my husband's parents took our extended family of 13 – that's seven adults and six children – on a Caribbean cruise. It was a lovely gift from my in-laws – no cooking, no cleaning, a person could get used to that kind of lifestyle. Of course, now it's back to reality. After spending seven days on a cruise ship being pampered by waiters and room attendants and just relaxing overlooking the deep blue sea, it's kind of a rude awakening to come back to my house, where there is always cooking and cleaning to do.

I especially enjoyed the dinners in the formal dining room. The food was quite good, and it was beautifully presented. But it was the service that excelled. Eloy, who was our waiter, gently draped cloth napkins across our laps. He memorized our names and he always knew what we wanted to drink. He kept refilling our water goblets, and used his elegant brass crumb scraper to scrape the crumbs and whatever odds and ends dropped from our plates. When a particular food didn't appeal to us, he would bring us something else. When the children didn't order the appetizer, he'd bring them bowls of fresh fruit, and if they weren't keen on the fruit, then the parents ate the fruit . . . and our own appetizer and our salad and our main entree and our dessert . . . You get the picture. It was a lot of fun.

Eloy was bound and determined to make those meals special for us. We were not to lift a finger – except to lift up the food when we ate. And the only other time we were supposed to lift a finger was on the last night, at the last meal, when we were to hold in our fingers the envelopes which contained the substantial tips we were to give our waiter Eloy, and the assistant waiter Maksym, and the head waiter whose name I never learned but who cut up Matthew's steak very nicely, thank you. Those of you who have been on a cruise know that you get tip guidelines right from the get-go about what is recommended to give to those who serve you. Rumor has it that they don't get a salary, just room and board and not much else, so they were looking towards the end of the week and towards that last meal. Now this didn't make Eloy any less wonderful a waiter. It did not make Eloy any less friendly and warm a person. But it did put his hospitality back into perspective. He wanted us to have a lovely meal, yes, so that at the end of the week we would give him a lovely tip. His focus on serving us was so that in the long run, the focus would be on him.

That's really where Martha is, you know. Her hospitality knew no bounds as fragrant steam arose from simmering pots and she arranged platters and refilled cups and swept the crumbs away. If you didn't care for the food in front of you, she'd find something else. If you needed a second helping, she'd give you a third and a fourth. Martha was bound and determined to make that meal special for her guests. She excelled at the task, and so she should. That was exactly what was expected of a good Jewish woman in a proper household. In fact throughout the Mediterranean world at that time, it was nearly a sacred duty to provide that kind of perfect hospitality to your guests. Guests were to be treated with honor and respect, care was to be

provided for their animals, water was to be provided to their feet, and the appropriate welcome for guests was to spread out a banquet table for them. Should Martha have done anything less, she would have been negligent in her hospitality; had Martha done anything less, it would reflect negatively on her. And to do all that, and do it well, would reflect positively on her. Good and proper hospitality is what she had to give. So, perhaps she was looking for a substantial tip after the meal? Not money in an envelope, but certainly something that reflected positively on her, something to put another jewel in her crown, something to improve her reputation in the town. She'd be commended heartily for the hearty meal. She'd received kudos for her culinary skills. Jesus, her esteemed guest, would raise Martha's self-esteem by proclaiming loudly at the end of the meal, "Martha, Martha! How your service has excelled! How excellently you served us!"

Do you see Martha's real focus here? It kind of puts it all back in perspective. Martha's focus on serving Jesus is so that in the long run, the focus would be on her. And such a focus in this place perverts real hospitality. Now her hospitality had become a chore, now it was a demanding task that she had to fulfill and fulfill well. Distracted by her task, worried that she might fail, angry that she was doing it all but really wanting praise because she was doing it all – it had become a burden to Martha. It was a burden to do what she was doing. That's when we begin to see Martha's passive-aggressive tendencies in the kitchen – banging the spoon against the pot, banging the lid back on, dramatically wiping the perspiration off her forehead, heavily sighing, looking angrily at her sister Mary, and then not addressing the issue with Mary at all, but going directly to the guest. The supreme hostess ended up embarrassing her sister and scolding the guest of honor.

In our human hands, this problem with story is that it has the potential to want to make us pit the two sisters against each other as if they were competing for Jesus' affection (Jesus always did like her best) or as if they were competing for our affection. But does our knowing what happened in that kitchen with Martha, make Martha any less wonderful a hostess or any less devoted to Jesus? We need to ask that question. Luke opens up the story with something that we also need to remember, another important part of the story – it was Martha who invited Jesus into her home in the first place. Luke writes, "Martha welcomed Jesus into her home". We have a tendency to forget that Martha had issued the initial invitation, and then we dismiss her love for Jesus. And when we do that, we may end up forgetting Jesus' love for her.

Yes, Martha chastised him, there's no doubt about that. She was kind of rude. She said, "Do you not care that my sister has left me do all this by myself?" And of course he cared, but not about the unimportant things, he cared about Martha. Can't you hear Jesus' affection for her, his love for her, come pouring out in these words (even in spite of her bad, boorish behavior) as Jesus responds, as only Jesus could, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things . . ." Jesus understood that she was burdened by trying to be the hostess with the mostest. He knew she was being pulled in so many different directions she didn't know up from down, left from right, or what to do next. He sensed her anger, her worry, her fear and her insecurity, and he responded with his calm reassurance, "Martha . . . there is only one thing that you need". Jesus was being a little playful here, fooling around with the words, giving them a double meaning. Jesus said, "Only one dish is needed, Martha, you don't need to give me a five course meal in order to satisfy me."

But he was also saying, “Only one thing is needed, Martha, and I'm providing it to you.” Jesus the guest took over the role of host, and he gave the main entree, and he was the host with the most in his teaching and his guiding and his caring for the people he was sent to save. Mary knew, as she sat at his feet, that she was being fed right then and there in a most wondrous way, and that whatever hunger she had deep in side her, it was being satisfied. Jesus, our dearest Lord Jesus, loved Martha too, deeply, and wanted her to be fed as well.

As we come here this morning, I would hazard a guess that you and I are worried and distracted about a whole host of different things. What directions are you being pulled in this week, so that you don't know up from down, left from right, or what to do next? What situation occurred this week that threw you for a loop, knocked the wind out of you, just when you thought things were going along rather smoothly? How high have you set your expectations for yourself and others around you? And how angry and disappointed do you get when your expectations aren't met? When we look at Martha, we might as well being looking in the mirror.

Am I saying that you and I aren't devoted to our Lord? Am I saying that the hospitality we offer others in His name is worthless? No I am not saying that. I am saying that when finally recognize how much like Martha we are most of the time, that is when we become open to hearing the words that Jesus had for her, and they become words for us. Words of love and affection and reassurance. Martha couldn't possibly shoulder the burden of daily life all by herself, and neither can we. And just as Jesus took on all of Martha's anxiety, he's willing to take on ours. Jesus' healing words for us whenever we are worried and angry and insecure, are transforming words for us when our serving has become self-serving and focus wrongly placed. Martha, Martha . . . go ahead and fill in different names here – Nancy, Nancy . . . Tim, Tim . . . there is only one needful thing, and it's here once more in this place and it shall not be taken from us. Jesus the host offers all that he is to us, to calm our fears, to direct our ways, and to nourish us for the journey ahead. So what we're going to do here today is listen to Him. We're going to trust in his powerful presence among us here. And then we're going to go out and take on all the bold new ventures in his name. He might even bestow upon you and me the ability to multi-task, a gift that Martha had. But always, our Lord's intention is that our focus is rightly placed on him, and on his promise for us. And then our gift of hospitality will become just that, it will become a gift and not a burden, not a chore, and you and I will share freely with the world the love and the goodness of God.

Amen.