

“From Guest to Host”
Reverend Martha Nilsen, July 17, 2016
Congregational Church of Pinehurst
Genesis 18:1-8, Luke 10:38-42

Is it possible to do what is absolutely right but still be wrong at the same time? Can you complete what is required of you, yet, not have done what is expected? That was Martha’s dilemma. She did what was right but it turned out wrong! How is this possible?

Let’s start with what she did right! As a hostess, Martha devoted herself to fulfilling what the Hebrew faith regarded as “sacred duty.” She would provide ample food, clean clothing, a warm shelter, and overnight protection to Jesus, a close friend. Now that doesn’t sound so extraordinary except that she, along with everyone else in the Middle Eastern world at that time, was expected to extend this same level of hospitality to more than just friends! Those with homes, whether a permanent shelter or a mere tent, were obligated to host the lone sojourner, a distant foreigner, runaway slaves, and even one’s personal enemies - overnight if necessary. That’s extravagant hospitality! These requirements were so fixed in the Hebrew tradition that citizens who violated this sacred duty were regarded as society’s most degenerate people.

You can picture Martha busily cleaning the house as well as preparing a special meal so that she and her sister, Mary,

could receive Jesus as an honored guest. Dutifully Martha performed her civic and religious responsibilities! Yet, she failed! How did she fail? We’ll answer that question in a few minutes...

As you might surmise, this cultural expectation of extravagant hospitality grew out of a nomadic society where inns were rare and exposure to the harsh, climatic elements deadly. Thus, opening up one’s home was a life-preserving act. Moreover, Jewish hospitality demanded the extension of brotherly or sisterly love to all unknown travelers. Foreigners, sojourners, and refugees were to be included in the Sabbath practice of rest. Especially significant is that all visitors were to be granted equal treatment under Jewish legal codes. Hospitality was a supreme act of social justice. Why? Because, as God reminded the Hebrew people, “once you were strangers in the foreign land of Egypt. As refugees escaping a deadly famine, you were taken in by the Egyptians! Remember their willing reception of you?” asks God.

The Hebrew bible tells of a time when God was a Guest. The finest example of Jewish hospitality is powerfully captured in the story of Abraham who races forth from his tent, humbles himself before three complete strangers, and urges them to come into his home in order to have their needs of drink, food, shelter and rest met. In the course of telling the story, we

eventually learn that Abraham's guests were God in the form of three angels.

The Hebrew bible then goes on to tell of a later time when God became a Host. It took place when ancestors of the Israelites were an alien people living in Egypt. After building a good life there, the Egyptian rulers had a sudden change of heart towards the Israelites and that's when things started to get really tough for the Hebrew people. But God, serving as their Almighty Host, drew the Israelites out of Egypt.. As their Host, God fed and clothed the Hebrew people while they traversed the barren Sinai wilderness. He brought them safely into the land of Canaan where food, health, peace, and the opportunity to raise a family would be possible. By placing these two Old Testament accounts side-by-side, we observe that chronologically God moves from being God as a Guest, to God as a Savior Host. Then what happened?

Years later, in a crude manger, in an inconsequential town of Bethlehem, a child is born who becomes an itinerant teacher living. Born under mysterious and enigmatic circumstances, Jesus is the consummate alien. He travels extensively relying solely upon the hospitality of local residents in order to bring God's message of love to the regions of Galilee and Judea. Jesus becomes a Guest. Dependent upon strangers for his survival, Jesus identifies closely with the most vulnerable - the illiterate, the ignored, the orphan, and widows.

Discomforted by him, the political and religious leaders mocked, ridiculed, and ultimately rejected Jesus. But He didn't reject a world that chose to reject him. No! By the plan of God, he became a Host!

As Host, what does Jesus do? He welcomes, takes care of, feeds, dines with, listens to, empowers, and admonishes oppressors. He feeds 5,000, shepherds his flock, teaches forgiveness, heals, comforts, washes soiled feet, institutes the Lord's Supper, and ultimately becomes the bread and wine of redemption and salvation for the whole world. Jesus is the Consummate Host! I find it rather interesting that Jesus, like God before him, moves from being a Guest to being a Savior Host.

Today daily newscasts show heartrending mass migrations of hungry, frightened people escaping famine or economic exploitation, governmental corruption or ironclad controls... even death. Is it possible for those living with economic and political stability to move towards becoming welcoming and empowering hosts? Can these citizens imagine the needs of the weary foreigners who arrive at unfamiliar shores or who trudge for days on end to cross invisible borders? Might the absence of hospitality as an act of social justice be contributing to the radicalization of disillusioned immigrants or hopeless young adults? Can prosperous nations bring witness

to the sacred duty of hospitality as called for by God millennia ago?

Hyeonseo Lee, a North Korean, imagined a better world for herself. As she wrote in the May 22 issue of the *Sunday New York Times*, “For years, thousands of North Koreans have been sneaking across the border of China to escape oppression. The Chinese authorities routinely hunt down defectors and return them to North Korea, where they face ...forced labor, torture...or even public execution.” In 1997 at age 17 Lee “stole into China, where,” she states, “I remained in hiding for more than ten years, and eventually found my way to South Korea” after buying a fake Chinese passport. “Even though some heartless North Koreans, Korean-Chinese and Chinese citizens have exploited vulnerable defectors for money, “I witnessed many acts of kindness by the Chinese.” In 2009 she risked going back to North Korea to lead her mother and brother to a better life in South Korea. On a bus ride through China, part of a 2000 mile journey, she and her family were subject to police inspection. Neither Lee’s mother or brother could speak Chinese, so they pretended to be deaf and mute, and none of the Chinese passengers [on the bus] said anything, sparing us,” she notes. “In the 1960s during the years of famine and the Cultural Revolution in China,” recalls Lee, many Chinese people escaped north seeking refuge in North Korea. Beginning in the late 1990s, the situation reversed, and North

Koreans have been fleeing their repressive government ever since.” She closes her article with these exact words: “The Chinese authorities should remember the *hospitality* their compatriots received in North Korea and treat desperate escapees with dignity and respect.” The plea for hospitality remains on the tongues of today’s refugees and upon those who, like Lee, remember being a refugee or an immigrant!

The God who was a Guest and then a Host, the same God who, incarnate in Jesus, was a Guest as an itinerant preacher and then became a Host to the world’s’ sins, now watches us. Imagine if everyone were to remember what it was like to receive generous hospitality and as a result became hosts offering equivalent hospitality! God gave us a solution. He gave us the formula for extravagant hospitality. God said, *When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt...* (Lev. 19:33-34).

Today’s twenty-one mission refugees rely solely upon foreign hospitality to survive. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) describes a model of hospitality similar to God’s that works! They state: *By enabling refugees to live in communities lawfully, peacefully and without harassment - in urban or rural areas - supports their ability to take responsibility*

for their lives and communities. Refugees bring personal skills and assets which can benefit the communities where they are living. They also bring the qualities of perseverance, flexibility and adaptability...

Humanity is a rich blend of different ethnicities, faiths, and nationalities. However, peel away all these designations and we all seek the same things: food, clothing, shelter, kindness, and dignity, enveloped in the desire for unhampered opportunities for education and work for ourselves and our families. True hospitality does not judge ethnicity, sexual orientation, race or gender. As the Hebrew people were taught, hospitality is an act of social justice!

Finally, we return to Martha and her failure as a host. Her mistake was not that she was too industrious by comparison to the reflective nature of Mary, for Jesus understood, as do we, that the world needs physical laborers as well as contemplative thinkers. However, on this night Martha failed because she was unable to discern the greater need. In her scurrying about she forgot to take into consideration what her guest truly needed. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem heading towards the cross. This would be his last visit with Mary and Martha - to convey final words because time was short. With Mary seated at His feet, Jesus implores her: "Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things." At this moment *there is only one thing*. "So, sit, be still and listen!

Believe, Martha! Believe in God, the Host Above all hosts and you will be granted sustaining, spiritual *food*, the comfortable *clothing* of ongoing forgiveness, the warm *shelter* of God's steadfast love, and the inner *protection* from erroneous ways, today and forevermore! So I say to all of you: "Believe! Come, take a seat at Jesus' feet. Be God's Guest...then be a Savior Host!" Amen.