

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 11]

July 22, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke 10: 38-42

“You are always welcome, Jesus. Any time.” Then one day, there he is, in your village, on your doorstep and you don’t know whether to be thrilled or panic. How does one prepare for a visit with Jesus? Pastor Joy Jordan-Lake, wondered: “Would you borrow fine china to show your deep and abiding respect for the Messiah --- or use paper plates to symbolize an equally deep and abiding lack of interest in material goods?” Would you serve Maine lobster — “an edible version of pouring perfume on his feet? Or would you fare better slapping peanut butter and jelly on Martin’s cheapest bread, carefully calculating the money you saved and buying groceries for a homeless family...” She concludes, “I think I’d serve peanut butter sandwiches on fine china and French wine in paper cups. If I could muster the courage, I’d tell him the truth: that he makes me nervous.”¹

In all honesty, I think the real sense of the presence of Jesus can make most of us nervous. The Almighty God, up there, bigger than life is one thing, but call-it-like it is, penetrating, in-your-life Jesus can make us uncomfortable. As comforted and grateful as we are, Jesus at our kitchen table, Jesus at the office coffee pot, Jesus in our car, at the mall or the airport makes us uneasy, catches us off guard.

A woman was sitting at the airport terminal waiting for her flight. She was reading when she suddenly felt as if the people around her were looking at her. When she looked up she realized they were looking past her. When she turned she saw a flight attendant pushing a wheelchair with this rumped elderly man, with long white hair that was a tangled mess and an expression that did not look the least bit friendly. She tried to go back to her book but kept thinking of the man. She was feeling like she should do something but she kept thinking, “Oh, God, please not now, now here.”

With a sigh to herself, she got up and knelt down before the man and said, “Sir, may I have the honor of brushing your hair for you?” He said, “What?” “Oh, great,” she thought, “he’s hard of hearing.” So she repeated herself, speaking a little more loudly. “Sir, may I have the honor of brushing your hair for you?” “He answered, “If you are going to talk to me, you are going to have to speak up; I’m practically deaf.” So this time she was almost yelling, “Sir, may I have the honor of brushing your for you?” Everyone was watching by

now to see what he would do. The old man just looked at her confused and said, “Well, I guess if you really want too. There’s a brush in the bag hanging on the back of my chair.” She got the brush out and set out to gently get the tangles out of his hair.

She worked a long time until every last tangle was out. Just as she finished, she heard the man crying. She went around and knelt before him and touched his hand. He said, “You know, I’m on my way home to see my bride of 60 years. I’ve been in the hospital for a long time. I had to have a special surgery in this town far away from my home. My wife couldn’t come with me because she is so frail herself.” *[pause]* “I was so worried about how terrible my hair looked, and I didn’t want her to see me looking so *awful*, but I couldn’t brush my hair myself.” He thanked her over and over again.² You just never know when God will call a meeting, or you have a chance meeting with Jesus, or you face the need to be Jesus-at-work in the world.

Hospitality like this, hospitality in it’s many forms, requires a certain amount of courage. It means opening one’s self, one’s inner sanctum, to another. It means taking someone into your private life, even if for a few hours. When that someone is Jesus, you never are quite sure if you’re in for a pleasant party or an unexpected lesson. Jesus is no ordinary guest. Mary and Martha discovered that one day.

Jesus comes into their home. Mary finds herself spellbound, sitting at his feet, hanging on his every word. Martha, the gospel says, became “distracted” by her many tasks. She hears Jesus speaking, but can’t really follow what he’s saying as she attends to the details of hosting guests. Her anger with Mary’s lack of help escalates to an eruption. She won’t even speak to Mary herself but asks Jesus to show her a bit of care by telling Mary to give her a hand. Jesus calls her by name, saying it twice, “Martha, Martha,” to break through her distractions, to get her attention. In that split second, I wonder if it was Mary or Martha who was most uneasy. Jesus takes both women seriously. He does not criticize Martha for her service but for being “worried and distracted by many things.” He does not tell her to do something else or to be like Mary and park herself at his feet. His rebuke is not intended to shame Martha but to challenge her to come out from behind her anxiousness and preoccupations *to seize this moment, to recognize and respond to the presence of God right there, right now, right in her house, right there in her life.*

Too often we try to make this story into a battle between do-ers and listeners, Christian activism and meditation, between obsessive franticness and calmly prioritizing.

But just last week we heard Jesus tell a lawyer, that enacting God's word, like the Good Samaritan who helped the robbery victim, was what discipleship was all about. This week Jesus is telling the active one that listening to God's Word is essential to discipleship. If you were to ask Jesus which model of discipleship we should adopt, the Good Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be "Yes."³ We are to serve *and* we are to dwell in God's word and presence. "There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment." In either instance, Jesus wants to know -- Will you let him in to your life? Will you notice him in a daily devotional book or Bible reading..... Will you notice him when he's standing right there in your living room or next to you in the checkout line or seated near you on a Sunday? What Jesus wanted with Martha and Mary was an encounter, communication, relationship. Jesus wants the same with you and me.

I don't know about you, but I can find countless ways to push Jesus aside to get to that other stuff that makes up life. After all, work does need to be done, families and friends need our care, bills need to be paid, meals and chores need to get done. Who has time to sit down at Jesus feet? But Jesus say, "Linda, Linda" or "Michael, Michael" or "Betty, Betty..... Don't you see. I'm *with you* at work, I'm *in* your family, *I am among* your friends, *at* the supper table, *by you* as you pay the bills and *next to you* as you pick up the house for the umpteenth time. Hospitality towards our Lord is not just about special occasions and Sunday mornings. It's about awareness of Jesus in the everyday so he can serve up life-filling portions of his word, his forgiveness, his love, his guidance, himself poured out for you and me.

I went on a retreat once. The priest told us to pull up a chair when we sat to pray. It was to be Jesus' chair. When we prayed, we were to image Jesus was right there listening like a dear friend, confidante or guide. I heard it as an important learning but, I must admit, I thought it a little silly. A while after that, my cat had convulsions in the early morning and the emergency veterinarian advised I let her go. A friend offered to bury my cat in her backyard when she died. So on this particularly terrible morning, I found myself driving to work on the Baltimore beltway in rush hour traffic, crying as the box with my dead cat was sitting in the back seat. Traffic came to a stop. I wanted to curse but Father Mark seemed to whisper in my ear. I looked over to the passenger seat in my car, "Can you believe this?" I yelled. I took a breath. "Jesus, I'm so sad, I'm so frustrated, I could just scream." I don't

remember much more, except that when I finally arrived at work, carrying my dear cat up to my office until my friend got home from work, I was sad but at peace.

I tried something similar the next time I took the youth group on a retreat. We designated a Jesus' chair in the living room where we gathered. If someone tried to sit there, a teen would yell, "Don't sit on Jesus." When they left the living room to go up to bed, they told Jesus good night. One teen brought down a blanket and pillow and laid it on the Jesus chair. As we were driving away that Sunday, Jennifer yelled from the back of the youth van — Wait! Wait!" I stepped on the brakes. "We left Jesus!" she said with all sincerity. "I don't think so" as I saw them make a space on one of the seats for Jesus.

Designating a Jesus chair is just one way to open our everyday lives to Jesus. There are so many other ways. Ask the Lord to bless rather than curse the person who just cut you off in traffic. Notice smiles and kindnesses with a "Thank you, Lord". Be attentive enough to the world around you to notice the person who looks lost or the short woman who needs help reaching something on the top shelf at the grocery store. Listen to those sudden or nagging nudges to phone someone who keeps coming to mind or to do something for another though you're not sure why. In countless ways, our Lord appears --- - like a cashier who could use a word of encouragement; the unexpected conversations shared as you wait at a restaurant or doctor's office; or when you stumble on a great sale for something needed at Holly Place, the Food Bank or School Supply Giveaway and you have the resources to buy it. Sometimes encountering Jesus presence in our lives will make us uncomfortable and other times it will simply amaze us. Will we answer with hospitality when Jesus comes visiting? Will we look up from our agenda to see Jesus offering us the better part which will not be taken away?

A young man was working as a summer volunteer at a Jesuit home for the poor in one of our most blighted cities. They worked all day, every day, handing out food, ministering to the human needs as best they could. One particularly difficult, long day was drawing to a close. He and an old Jesuit priest finally took care of the last person and were pushing the big oak door closed for the night when they spotted yet one more forlorn soul shuffling his way up the sidewalk toward the center. The young man, so tired and worn, had a slip of the tongue and quietly muttered, "Jesus Christ..... " The old priest said, "Could be, could be. We had better open the door."⁴

Pastor Linda M Alessandri

ENDNOTES

1.1. Joy Jordan-Lake, as quoted in Pulpit Resource, July 18, 2004, pp 15-16. Originally appeared in "Jesus Makes Me Nervous," The Christian Century, July 27-August 3, 1994, pp 711-712.

2. Unknown, received in an e-mail.

3.3. Fred Craddock, Interpretation Commentary

4.4. William H. Willimon, "Hospitality," Pulpit Resource, July 18, 2004 p 16.