

Someone's in the Kitchen with....

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Here is a true story, but somehow it sounds more like a parable to me:

A young African American woman named Natasha Howell wrote on facebook on July 8: "So this morning I went into a convenience store to get a protein bar. As I walked through the door, I noticed that there were two white police officers (one about my age the other several years older) talking to the clerk (an older white woman) behind the counter about the shootings that have gone on in the past few days. They all looked at me and fell silent. I went about my business to get what I was looking for, as I turned back up the aisle to go pay, the oldest officer was standing at the top of the aisle watching me. As I got closer he asked me, "How I was doing?" I replied, "Okay, and you?" He looked at me with a strange look and asked me, "How are you really doing?" I looked at him and said "I'm tired!" His reply was, "me too." Then he said, "I guess it's not easy being either of us right now is it." I said, "No, it's not." Then he hugged me and I cried. I had never seen that man before in my life. I have no idea why he was moved to talk to me. What I do know is that he and I shared a moment this morning, and that was absolutely beautiful. No judgments, No justifications, just two people sharing a moment."

Two people sharing a moment: maybe this is a new way to look at our Bible passages about ancient Middle Eastern hospitality. Because, what is hospitality but creating a space where moments of connection are shared?

The Genesis story read earlier is one of those events called a theophany: an appearance of God. Now, I tend to read these passages about the ancestral background of the Hebrew people as parables rather than history. I certainly don't read them for numerical accuracy or take people's ages at face value. But they do give a sense of how those people traced the flow of divine power in and out of their lives. Like so many of these stories, this one is confusing. It says that, one hot afternoon, Abraham was taking it easy under the entrance flap of his tent. The Lord appeared (a theophany). But it says that Abraham looked up and saw three men standing there. Then, Abraham speaks in the singular: "My Lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant." The text goes back and forth between singular and plural for the rest of the story, maybe appropriately blurring this appearance: Is it people? Is it angels? Is it God?

But, to the good host, this hardly matters. In the searing heat of the desert, the law of hospitality was a matter of human survival. Foot washing, shade, food, drink: Abraham literally runs around, taking care of everything, acting like a servant, and enlisting his wife to do the baking. Then he stands by attentively while the three men eat. In some ways, this is all just standard Middle Eastern hospitality. But the stage is being set for a moment: a revelation. It is not a new message: Abraham has been told in four previous conversations with God that he will have children with Sarah. The last time the heavenly promise was spoken, in chapter 17, Abraham fell on his face laughing. In today's story, it is Sarah who gets the giggles. And this time, we get specifics: in due season (some translations say "this time next year") Sarah will be holding her son. I think of this as God's sideways conversation with Sarah, who is listening in, hidden behind the wall of the tent. She laughs inwardly, her disbelieving response to the outrageous news. Who *are* these guests? Are they crazy? Don't they know how old she is? Sarah has just heard two things put side by side that don't make sense anymore: Sarah and baby. Sometimes God does this: a kind of holy humor that's more true than all our serious plans.

The guest had heard all her silent doubts and dismisses them with “Is anything too wonderful for God?”

All of that desert hospitality, all Abraham’s work and attention, the visitors prediction, Sarah’s laughter and doubt, all build up to the climax of the story: “Is anything too wonderful for God?” This is the crux of the story, the moment where human and divine meet. Hospitality has set the stage and made all this possible. This theophany, this divine messenger, hears Sarah’s doubt and humor and fear, but the message remains: a baby is coming to turn her life up side down.

The postscript, a few chapters later, proves this to be true. Sarah holds her son in her arms, named Isaac, which means...laughter, or “he laughs.” God has made laughter for me, she sings. And everybody else will be laughing too. But the tone of the laughter has shifted from disbelief to incredulous joy. It’s still an unbelievable moment, but unbelievably wonderful. Little did she imagine, when those guests showed up at her tent, that God’s promises could still come true.

This is a parable about receptivity, trust and patience. It is about the mysterious outcomes of hospitality. In the Bible hospitality is a much richer, larger concept than mere generosity or gourmet cooking. Hospitality is an attitude, a disposition of the heart, out of which generous or barrier-breaking actions flow. Then, something mysterious happens, the arithmetic starts to shift, and there is more here than meets the eye. God has caught our attention.

We are also made aware of the fluid nature of hospitality: the give and take, the spoken and unspoken, the timing of eating and speaking, the rushing around...and the still moment.

Luke’s brief story about Martha and Mary is often interpreted as a critique of action over contemplation. Busy Martha doesn’t get much credit here for her hard work. She is doing what she thinks best: focusing on showing hospitality in the same ways that Abraham has done. Mary, meanwhile is doing what she thinks best: focusing on paying attention to Jesus’ words. I don’t like to think of this as an either/or choice: either get busy serving or be a good listener. Jesus was not telling Martha, “Never prepare a meal for me again!” He *noticed* her frame of mind, her well-being. Martha, meanwhile is actually paying more attention, in a negative way, to Mary than to her guest. Martha is expending a huge amount of energy on being exasperated, distracted by Mary’s attitude as much as the work at hand. We know that’s not healthy. It reminds me of that quote from the atheist Bertrand Russell: “One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important.” Maybe Martha was near the breaking point. She had forgotten that real hospitality is giving attention to people, noticing what they need – much as the police officer in the Natasha Howell’s story did. David Augsburg, professor of pastoral care and counseling, wrote, “Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people cannot tell the difference.” It isn’t hotel hospitality, it isn’t 5-star restaurant hospitality that Jesus was looking for. It was receptivity, even if that means only one main dish, and no dessert. “The better part” he speaks of is paying attention to the fluid nature of the relationship, the ebb and flow, the give and take, the spoken and unspoken, the timing of eating and speaking, the rushing around and the stillness.

So it is not a matter of choosing between contemplation and action. It is two sides of the same coin: Mary illustrates the first part of the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind.” Martha illustrates the second part: “and your neighbor as yourself. Mary is stirred by the Spirit to devotion, and Martha puts devotion into practice. Abraham rushes around making a feast for his guests, then stands quietly by waiting for them to speak. It is not either/or. It’s a matter of when, and with what

kind of attention. That whole idea of the balance and interplay between action and contemplation, between putting ourselves forward in service or in advocacy, and then at times being passive and receptive, available to God's deep voice within us: this is all part of the rhythm of life, is all part of being human.

Here is another real-life parable:

A pastor and her husband went to a neighborhood restaurant for an early dinner out. Seated at a table at the other end of the room was a family: Mom, Dad, brother sister. They sat in silence with bowed heads, their hands close together. The pastor made an assumption that they were having a table grace before their meal and was very impressed.

A long silence. Dad shifted in his seat and brought his cell-phone into sight so that it was closer to his line of vision. It turns out that among them were two phones and two tablets, all in use. This family went out to dinner to be together, but chose to spend their time being distracted and removed from one another by busy-ness. It is so easy to do this when we don't stow or turn off our phones: people find ourselves googling random information--"Average American's savings for retirement." "How many Marx Brothers were there?" "World population growth data." "Definition of aniconic." In these difficult days, with seemingly random violence in our nation and abroad, this kind of distracted occupation may serve to isolate us and insulate us from really feeling, really learning, really reaching out.

It seems sometimes that busy-ness, and being constantly occupied has become a virtue in our culture. And many of us are busy people. And, we make sure to pass this "virtue" on to the next generation, teaching them about the importance of being busy. We are actually proud of the productivity that keeps us from being fully alive and paying attention to the world around us. People often ask me, "How are you?" and then, almost without pause, "Are you busy?" Or sometimes they tell me, "You must be very busy." And I often wonder what they think "busy" is, for a minister. Or *should* be, for a minister. Yes of course there are meetings and phone calls, visiting and worship preparation and general parishioner-herding – no lack of things to do. But the most valuable time is often the still time, the listening time. It is *so* easy for me to get into Martha-mode, picking things up and putting them down, organizing, going up and down the stairs, looking for pencils or batteries, etc., etc. But I know that I and this community benefit when I sometimes sit down with the other Mary, and just listen – when I just pay attention. Maybe someday someone will say to me – or to you, for that matter – "You must be spending a lot of time sitting still praying for our congregation and meditating on our future. Or, "You must spend a lot of time laughing, what with all God's wonderful plans for us!"

So I am going to go looking for the "better part," for a theophany, for holy hospitality. Maybe you will find me in a convenience store, noticing the pain that is held inside of many of us because of violence and racial tension. Maybe you will find me in the kitchen, talking over a book on the Sabbath while doing the dishes. You might find me lurking behind the tent, listening for a sideways conversation with God about new life. You might find me sitting at the feet of a teacher while the toast burns and the dishes pile up. You might even find me clattering around in the kitchen, wondering where all my helpers are. Or maybe I will be right here, at home in this house of prayer, opening my heart with receptivity and trust to parables of need and justice and compassion. I want to hear, with Sarah, "Is anything too wonderful for God?" I want to sing, with Sarah, "God has made laughter for me!"