

Both/And
Genesis 18:1-10; Luke 10:25-42

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In our Old Testament lesson this morning, Abraham is hanging around his tent, minding his own business. Suddenly, he sees three people. He doesn't yet know they are divine beings. All he sees are three strangers.

Immediately, though, Abraham jumps into action and does what any good person of his day would do. He offers hospitality. A little water to wash your feet. Some bread to still your hunger. Hang out and rest a while before going on your way. All very fine and good. Abraham is conventionally hospitable.

But then, Abraham goes way beyond standard etiquette. He orders up freshly baked bread. He selects a tender calf and has it butchered, dressed, and cooked. He pours out some milk and yogurt. Then, he personally serves his guests. Finally, he stands nearby to wait on them. Abraham goes above and beyond conventional standards of etiquette. Abraham sets the bar for generous hospitality.

Hospitality to strangers is a very important part of both Judaism and Christianity. Abraham, as we see, sets the standard for the rest of us believers to follow. One of the signs of being a believer in God is practicing generous hospitality, just like Abraham. Strangers are welcomed, generously welcomed, by those of us who worship God.

We saw this theme of hospitality played out last week in the story of the Good Samaritan. Not only did the Samaritan care for the man with everything he had, the Samaritan also offered to pay for even more. Truly, the Samaritan was a child of Abraham. He practiced generous self-giving to a total stranger.

That's all well and good, but I think we have to ask ourselves, 'is that all there is?' Is that what Christianity is all about? Is Christianity really nothing more than generosity to a stranger, help to those in distress, self-giving love? Nothing wrong with generous self-giving, obviously. But is Christianity more than just kindness on steroids? Is it more than that?

Some years ago, I met a gentleman who was going on a church mission trip. He was very excited about this mission trip. Every year he went wherever the church went and did whatever needed doing. Cleaning up after a natural disaster. Fixing up a home for someone who was impoverished. You name it, he was glad to be there. Even used part of his annual vacation time. Giving of himself in this way was very, very important to him.

But interestingly, that was all he did. He never served on a church committee. He never took part in a workday around the building. He never went to a worship service, not even at Christmas or Easter. Literally all he did was go on this mission trip. He didn't see the point of anything else. For him, being in relationship with God meant going on a mission trip every year. And that was all.

A wonderful thing to do, yes. For sure. But is that the sum total of Christianity? Is that what our faith is all about? An extreme form of generous hospitality, generous self-giving on steroids?

Look at these four questions.

Is it the TRUTH?

Is it FAIR to all concerned?

Will it build GOODWILL and better FRIENDSHIPS?

Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

Does anybody recognize this? Is it in the Bible? Is it from one of our Creeds? Is it in the Bible? Certainly, I can imagine Jesus saying something like this during the Sermon on the Mount.

Actually, it's from the Rotary Club. It's the Rotary Club 4-WAY TEST. Of the things we think, say or do,
Is it the TRUTH?

Is it FAIR to all concerned?
Will it build GOODWILL and better FRIENDSHIPS?
Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

Every week, along with a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance, they recite the 4-Way Test. It's part of who they are. Is that Christianity? Is Christianity a sacralized form of middle-class manners? Is Christianity nothing more than extreme kindness and concern for others?

If so, then in our New Testament Lesson, Martha should be the epitome of the perfect follower of Jesus. She should be the 1st century equivalent of Abraham.

But clearly, she's not. Jesus does not hold her up as a role model. In fact, his double use of her name – Martha, Martha – would have been heard as a mild rebuke. Why?

We need to understand. This story is not about sibling rivalry. It's not about faith versus works. It's not about the role or place of women. It's not about devaluing or minimizing caring for others. It's not about whether or not Jesus and the disciples could cook for themselves. It's not about how many dishes need to be served to a guest and it's not telling us there is anything wrong with whipping up a big meal on a moment's notice. If we go down those paths, we're missing the point.

The point is, Christianity is also about knowing Jesus. Just as much as Christianity is about generous self-giving, Christianity is also about taking time to sit and learn about Jesus. It's about getting to know Jesus as a person. It's about getting to know him as a savior. This story tells us serving up a big heaping helping of holy hospitality is good and wonderful. Yes. But it also tells us we need to make time to sit at Jesus' feet and learn how to be his follower. Without it, we're only half a disciple. Without it, we're incomplete.

As I said a minute ago, the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha are meant to be read together. When

we read them together, we get a clear picture of the ideal disciple. Someone who knows when to be busy, welcoming, loving, generous, and someone who knows when to sit, study, pray, worship, and learn from Jesus.

The best disciple is **never** either/or. Never **either** generously serving **or** sitting and listening. No, the best disciple is **always** both/and. **Both** generously serving **and** sitting and listening to Jesus.

I encourage all of us, all of us, but especially our leaders, to both serve and sit at Jesus' feet. I say especially our leaders because first, we need you to be a role model. The rest of us need to see you being a model disciple so we can take courage and instruction from your example. Second, we need you to both serve and sit and listen because it will be good for your spiritual growth. And when our leaders grow in faith, we as a congregation grow in faith, as well.

Recently, our congregation ordained and installed some new leaders into office. Today, we are going to install one more. As we call on this leader, and all our leaders, to be good examples for us, may we also be good examples for them. May they see us busy and serving. May they see us sitting at Jesus' feet. Amen.