

## Session VI – Our True Home is God: Christian Hospitality

Bible Verses of Focus: Luke 10:38-42, Genesis 18:1-15

### Resources Needed:

- Printed copies of homework for session V
- Bibles, pencils, paper.

### Suggested Gathering Exercise

At the appointed beginning and /or ending times, the group leader(s) may want to lead the group in brief devotions or a prayer or to arrange for a group member to do so. Each session begins with participants relating some part of their personal stories/lives to some aspect of local affordable housing dynamics. Perhaps one or more participants could tell a story about an occasion when they relied on the hospitality of strangers/foreigners/extremely poor persons and reflect upon that experience.

### Bible Study Luke 10:38-42 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." <sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup> there is need of only one thing.<sup>[a]</sup> Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

Footnotes: Luke 10:42 Other ancient authorities read few things are necessary, or only one

The story of Mary and Martha's friendship with Jesus is found here in Luke and also in John's Gospel (John 11:1, 5, 18). John tells us that the village is Bethany, near Jerusalem. Anyone welcoming Jesus or his followers could reasonably expect to receive blessings for having offered them hospitality. Paul, for instance, counsels the early Church to continue to practice the ancient disciplines of hospitality (Romans 12:13) and reminds them, "Do not forget hospitality, for through it some, unknown to themselves, entertained angels." (Hebrews 13:2) The radicality of the story must be noted: Jesus takes on women as disciples when other rabbis of that time did not, and Jesus accepts the hospitality of Martha's home with no mention of a brother or other male of her family being present. In her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine Pohl reminds us that welcoming a guest with cookies and tea fresh from the kitchen is not always mere social courtesy.

*Because the practice of hospitality is so significant in establishing and reinforcing social relationships and moral bonds, we notice its more subversive character only when socially undervalued persons are welcomed...hospitality that welcomes "the least" and recognizes their equal value can be an act of resistance and defiance, a challenge to the values and expectations of the larger community. (Grand Rapids, Erdmanns, 1999, p. 62)*

While Martha is busy with the housework of providing food, comfort, and cleanliness for Jesus, Mary sits at Jesus's feet and listens to his teaching. Martha complains to Jesus that she alone has been left to do all the work. We can hear the inflection of her voice as she inquires, "Can't you tell my sister to get off her perch at your feet and wash some dishes?" Jesus does not say that Martha has erred in providing hospitality, but rather tells her that Mary has chosen the better part of hospitality—her patient and undivided attention. It is common that when the host invites the sojourner or stranger to be the guest in their home, the newly present guest begins to tell their personal story and the host becomes the guest who patiently receives the gift of that story and presence. Host and guest trade roles back and forth, and both are blessed in the process. Fred Craddock writes: "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. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan [when he went and did] or Mary [who sat and listened], his answer would probably be Yes." (*Luke, A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox, Louisville, 1990, p. 152)

Genesis 18:1-15 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

*The Lord appeared to Abraham<sup>1</sup> by the oaks<sup>1</sup> of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." <sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.*

*<sup>9</sup> They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." <sup>10</sup> Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." <sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."*

One of the oldest phrases in the Hebrew Scriptures, dating to a time of oral history before written texts, is found in Deuteronomy 26:5:

*“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.”*

This ancient story, including the journeys of Abraham and Sarai as they immigrate away from their home territory but take with them an awareness of the presence of God, is foundational to how Jews, Muslims, and Christians think of themselves in 2019. Again and again, the worshiping community is urged to provide hospitality to strangers and immigrants as a way of being in solidarity with their own religious heritage and faithful to God. Leviticus 19:33-34 (NRSV) states:

*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. <sup>34</sup> 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: I am the Lord your God.*

In the text above, the promise of God to make Abraham and Sarai into a mighty and populous nation is in doubt because they are growing old and there are no offspring.

We don't know why Abraham was so eager to provide hospitality to the three strangers. He may simply enjoy having interesting new house guests or he may be rushing to greet them out of fear in order to preempt them from simply taking whatever they want by force. In any case, hospitality is commanded by God in our sacred texts and was a basic necessity for surviving and traveling in the ancient Near East. Abraham provides his guests with the best food he has to offer (a calf) and after he has served them food he waited on them as a servant while they ate. Sarai's lack of offspring has no doubt been a source of much stress and mourning as well as a source of doubt about the reliability of Sarai and Abraham's perception of what God's promise (mighty and populous nation) is. The question, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" is probably genuine and not rhetorical (not just a statement that nothing too wonderful for God to accomplish). The reader may chuckle a bit with Sarai when it is suggested that the elderly couple will yet have many descendants. It is interesting to note that God, as one or all three of the guests, takes on the role of host to Abraham and Sarai, leaving the role of the honored guest who is listened to and waited upon and becoming instead the one who enters into their story and meets their needs with further assurance of the promised blessing. Perhaps Abraham has passed a sort of "hospitality test" and been found faithful to the covenant and obedient to God's command of hospitality. Questioning God, which both Abraham and Sarai do, does not result in God's condemnation of them even when Sarai (presumably) lies in denying she has laughed, but rather results in continuing the conversation.

Modern Christians cannot read the story of God visiting Abraham and Sarai in human form without thinking of God coming to humankind in Jesus Christ and both commending those who provide hospitality and pronouncing judgement of those who do not (Matthew 25:43) because to provide hospitality to the poorest and most marginal is to provide hospitality to the Holy. The lines between the traditional roles of host and guest become increasingly blurred as the conversation between Sarai, Abraham, and God continues. Eventually what we experience more than hosts and guests is love, compassion, and relationship.

## Discussion

- + If Mary is exemplary in sitting and pondering and Martha is exemplary in going and doing, where do you fall on the Martha/Mary continuum?
- + Is there a difference between a house and a home? How do you know when you are in someone's home?
- + Have you experienced the reversal of roles between host and guest? Explain.
- + At the communion table who are hosts and who are guests?
- + Have you ever attended a worship service when you felt unwelcome or simply ignored? What behaviors do you practice as spiritual disciplines that are welcoming?
- + One of the key discoveries of humankind's faith journey was that the worshiping community is/could be/should be more grounded in our relationship with God than in a particular place, and that there is only one God for all peoples, times and places; how does the concept of home relate to the presence of God?
- + Who is welcomed in your city or town, and who is excluded or ignored?

## Living Our Faith

While some politicians make it seem that the rate of undocumented immigration has risen dramatically in the past few years, the opposite is actually true. A June 20, 2018 New York Times article by Linda Qiu shows that monthly apprehensions of people attempting to cross the southern border illegally fell from over 200,000 in the year 2000 to about 40,000 in 2018. It is true that the number of minors attempting to cross the border is up in recent months, but unaccompanied minors and families including minors usually are hoping to be found by border agents and to enter legally as refugees. In their book, Welcoming the Stranger (Intervarsity, Downer's Grove, 2018), Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang bring the light of facts to many of the rumors and prejudices which cloud our perceptions of immigration in the United States.

For instance:

- (1) More than 99% of our residents have an immigration history. (p. 44)
- (2) More than 40% of those who are unlawfully present in the U.S. have never crossed our border illegally (most crossed legally and overstayed a visa). (p. 38)
- (3) Of the roughly 680,000 Syrian immigrants who recently arrived, 45% are Christians although many assume they are all Muslim. (p.39)
- (4) Immigrants (except for those with refugee status) are rarely eligible for means-tested government assistance for the first five years they are in the U.S. and when they do use government assistance, they do so at much lower rates than native born Americans of the same income level. (p.29)
- (5) Almost all undocumented workers pay taxes in one form or another even though they are ineligible for most government services. (p. 27)
- (6) Most foreign-born individuals (3 of 4) are present in the U.S. lawfully. (p.23)
- (7) Immigrants or their children are responsible for founding 40% of the Fortune 500 companies, including such brands as Disney, Apple, General Electric, Google, and McDonalds. (p. 88)

Food processing industry in Iowa has long acted as a magnet for immigrant groups in such locations as West Liberty, Muscatine, Marshalltown, Postville, and Columbus Junction. The 2018 tornado which damaged over 600 homes in Marshalltown only exacerbated the problems of

undocumented workers and their families because many of them were not eligible for emergency or rebuilding assistance because of their immigration status. Johnson County has seen “waves” of immigrants from such locations as Sudan, The Congo, and Central America. Some of these immigrants have arrived as refugees escaping religious, ethnic, and racial persecution. Some of these immigrant groups have formed their own worshipping communities in Johnson County, including Christian congregations. For several years the Consultation of Religious Communities and the Center for Worker Justice in Johnson County actively lobbied City and County governments to enact “sanctuary city” practices. These practices are not designed to end legal deportation, but rather to make Johnson County safer for all of its residents by making immigrants more difficult to exploit and normalizing interactions between law enforcement and undocumented workers and their families. The Iowa City City Council stopped short of declaring the city a “Sanctuary City,” but did state that the city would not commit its resources or take enforcement action toward Federal Immigration laws. Johnson County took a similar stand. In 2018, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds signed into law an anti-sanctuary-city law which Johnson County Sheriff Lonny Pulkrabek called a “terrible law.”

(Iowa City Press Citizen, [wgreenberg@press-citizen.com](mailto:wgreenberg@press-citizen.com), April 11, 2018)

What are your thoughts about immigration’s impact on Johnson County?

The Scriptures of the Abrahamic religions are all very clear about how immigrants, strangers, and resident aliens are to be treated by people of faith. It is often said that we are a nation of immigrants; in such a nation, what does it mean to confess “My ancestor was a wandering Aramean”? What should local faith communities be doing in regard to immigration? Support the Center for Worker Justice? Sponsor refugee families? Lobby our congressional delegation for fairer and more orderly immigration policies? Host a nesting immigrant congregation in our facility?

In his Pulitzer-Prize-winning book, *Evicted* (New York, Broadway, 2016), Matthew Desmond follows eight families in Milwaukee as they struggle to achieve stable, affordable, safe housing. He documents how some landlords use eviction as a way of economically exploiting the poor, for whom any small event such as an automobile breakdown or even a snowball thrown at an automobile may trigger a series of events resulting in loss of most possessions and of a place to call home. In the Epilogue (pp. 393) Desmond writes:

*Home is the center of life. It is a refuge from the grind of work, the pressure of school, and the menace of the streets. We say that at home we can “be ourselves.” Everywhere else we are someone else. At home we remove our masks...The home is the wellspring of personhood. It is where our identity takes root and blossoms, where as children, we imagine, play and question, and as adolescents we retreat and try ...The home remains the primary basis of life.*

Not all landlords are slumlords; not all landlords get wealthy or do so at the expense of poor families. Are there responsible landlords in our congregation who are fair and generous with their tenants? How can we support landlords in providing safe, decent, stable housing for their tenants? None of us own our physical homes forever; does that make us all “renters”?

Are worshipping communities safe places where we can “be ourselves”? Is God our ultimate present and future home? What or who is home for you? Can we be at home with God and not welcome the stranger, sojourner, or immigrant into our community, our homes, our congregation?

### **Closing**

Announce the scriptures passages and topics for the next session and distribute on paper or via email the notes and meeting details for that session.

The group may want to re-read aloud the Scriptural texts for this session, to pray together, to sing a song of blessing and benediction, or participate in some other closing activity. This Bible study series may be used by other congregations or groups in the future, and can undoubtedly be improved in its methods and content. Please share any comments or suggestions you have with your group leader or send them directly to John McKinstry at [adisciple0040@msn.com](mailto:adisciple0040@msn.com).