

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In today's Old Testament reading and Gospel reading, we see saints offering marvelous hospitality.

Three men show up at Abraham's tent; they're strangers to him, and yet what hospitality he showed to them ... water for their dry and dusty feet; a young calf, curds, and bread for their growling stomachs; milk for their parched mouths. Abraham the host served them as they ate.

What an example! Without the benefit of Jesus' words: "*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me*" (Matt. 25:35) and "*as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me*" (Matt. 25:40), Abraham welcomed and fed the three "*men,*" as our text identifies them, but one of them was later found to be the LORD Himself. Without the New Testament instructing him — "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares*" (Heb. 13:2), Abraham showed hospitality to these three strangers, two of whom would be identified as angels who helped rescue Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom.

Luther commends Abraham's example to the church, saying, "There is hospitality wherever the church is" (*Luther's Works*, 3:178). This point is brought home to me in the flesh as Jessica, Darryl, and I go walking about our neighborhood, meeting people, talking with them, and praying for and with them. Some of them are not upright, middle-class folks. And yet, we talk to them, tell them about Jesus, and invite them to our church. Might they make us a bit uncomfortable? I'd guess so. Might they try to take advantage of our hospitality? Could be.

Luther said this of Abraham: "Undoubtedly idle men frequently took advantage of Abraham by abusing his generosity and flocking to him, for they knew that a table was prepared for them where he lived and that everything was placed at their disposal." And Luther said to his hearers: "If we are deceived now and then, well and good. In spite of this our good will is demonstrated to God, and the kind act which is lost on an evil and ungrateful person is not lost on Christ, in whose name we are generous." Luther isn't calling upon the church to be foolish or naïve. He's not suggesting that we should be generous to those that are "manifestly evil" (*LW* 3:183). But to the poor and needy ....

We're not quite to the day when the church remembers 3<sup>rd</sup> century deacon St. Lawrence (August 10). One famous story about him was that when the Roman emperor sought to gain the treasures of the church, Lawrence sold all of the church's vessels and gave them to the poor, and he gave away the church's

property. He then came to the emperor with these poor, crippled, blind, and suffering people, and proclaimed: “These are the true treasures of the Church.” He was rewarded with martyrdom.

Surely, it is true that the church is a place of hospitality, not just for the well-to-do, but especially for the poor and needy. Our hospitals that bear church’s names (hospital and hospitality both come from the same Latin root), our social services and mercy agencies, our homes for the needy, etc., all bear witness to the fact that the church is a mercy place. Look in our bulletin today — people look to the church to help with diapers for families, with school supplies for school kids, with haircuts to start the school year. We understand ourselves in this way.

Outside of the church, many view her as only this, as only a place for people to come to be shown mercy, where bodily needs are met. But our texts today correct that view. Before she is a place of mercy, she is a place of grace, a place to receive Divine favor.

Surely Martha, in our Gospel, was an example of showing hospitality, too. Jesus came to her town, to her home, and she welcomed him. Then, not unlike Abraham and Sarah, she proceeded to busy herself “*with much serving.*” The word here translated as “*distracted*” could indicate that Martha would have rather joined her sister Mary who, rather than helping, was sitting at Jesus’ feet. She couldn’t, she surely felt. It had to be done.

Finally, in frustration, Martha came to Jesus and complained. “I’m doing this serving all by myself. My sister is not helping.” “*Tell her ... to help me.*”

But Jesus didn’t respond how we might think appropriate. He didn’t tell Mary to get up and help her sister. Rather He gently corrected Martha and reminded her of the “one thing needful” as we just sang. That’s the treasure of the church — the story of St. Lawrence notwithstanding.

The treasures of the church are not worldly riches; Lawrence had that right. But the true treasures of the church are not the poor, crippled, blind, and suffering either; they are Christ Himself, and the eternal, heavenly riches He won for mankind by His cross and resurrection. The true treasures of the Church are those blessings conveyed by Jesus through His word, so that, “take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Though these all be gone, Our vict’ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth” (LSB656:4).

Abraham knew the true treasure of the church. He had been promised it: “*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ... and in you [that is, in Abraham’s offspring, meaning Christ (Gen. 22:18; Gal. 3:16)] all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Gen. 12:3).

The Lord had repeated the promise to Abraham, and in our Old Testament reading again, the Lord assured Abraham that the son of promise would come from him through Sarah, though they *“were [both] old, advanced in years”* and *“The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.”* In a year, Sarah would bear Isaac, and the covenant would be renewed through him, and through Jacob, and all the way to Jesus, who is the priceless treasure by whom the whole world would be blessed.

Martha must surely have taken Jesus’ admonition to heart. We don’t hear it here, but she surely took her apron off, put her spoon down, and sat down with Mary to hear Jesus’ word, for the next time we meet up with Martha and Mary, it’s at the death of their brother, Lazarus. When Jesus arrived in Bethany that time, it was Martha that came out to greet Him. She knew who He was and confessed it: *“you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world”* (John 11:27). She knew His relationship with the Father: *“even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you”* (John 11:22). She knew the blessing He came to bring: *“I know that [my brother] will rise again in the resurrection on the last day”* (John 11:24). Jesus gave them a foretaste of that in the raising of Lazarus.

That doesn’t mean Martha stopped serving. It’s a guess, but I’d say after Jesus’ lesson, both Mary and Martha went to serve. We certainly know that six days before Jesus’ last Passover, Jesus was again in Bethany in their house, with Lazarus alive sitting at the table with Jesus and Martha again serving (John 12:2).

But Martha had learned — as should we, for how easy it is for us in the church to become distracted with much serving and forget the one thing needful — Martha learned that, unlike Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45), we need to be served before we can go forth serving. We need to be fed with Jesus’ word and with His body and blood, so that we can go forth in love and service of our neighbor. We need to be encouraged in our service and that happens as we first sit as Jesus’ feet and learn from Him.

The world doesn’t teach that. The world asks, “What’s in it for me?” The church goes forth in love and service of neighbor, not grudgingly because of the Law, but joyfully, because of the Gospel, having learned of how Jesus first loved us in giving up His life for us, and how He calls us to love in return.

Therefore, Lord, teach us to regard this treasure highly. Kindle in our hearts a love of Your word. Make us devout in receiving Your gifts. Give us contentment in our salvation. Increase in us a zeal to love others. And take us at last to our heavenly home.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.