

“Prayerful Hospitality”  
July 20, 2025  
Scripture: Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

Every year since 2008, our church has participated in and helped sponsor a meal hosted by the Islamic Society of Niagara Frontier at the mosque on Heim Road during Ramadan. In Islam, Ramadan is the month spent fasting each day from sunrise to sunset; the fast is broken with a meal called *iftar*, which means literally “breakfast.” The event itself is called “Abraham’s Table,” and it’s rooted in this story from Genesis.

In the story Abraham is approached by three figures, who those of us in the audience know are God, but he takes to be merely weary travelers. He opens his home to them and prepares an elaborate meal as a gesture of hospitality. Among nomadic people in the ancient world, hospitality was an expectation honored by just about everyone, I think. It was understood that offering a meal and refreshment to travelers was a matter of life and death. And those who provided that service knew there could come a time when they would be in need of it. So, it wasn’t a casual practice.

You notice Abraham offers his guests water and bread at first, but comes back with a roasted calf and cakes and I suspect other delicacies they could enjoy. Under promising and over delivering is a good strategy for making friends. Abraham was pretty smart, but more than that he seems to be genuinely honored to provide for others from his abundance. He runs around excitedly making all the preparations, directing his household to give the very best of what they have.

I’ve always had that feeling during Abraham’s Table at the mosque. Most years that meal has been preceded by a walk from here at North to Heim Road, about four and a half miles, called “The Walk of Abraham.” It’s an opportunity for the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam to come together and share our mutual origin and our affection for one another. Abraham’s Table is said to have four corners: one for Muslims, one for Jews, one for Christians, and one for all other faiths. It’s a welcoming table where everyone has a place because everyone belongs. I believe it represents the best of who we are and I’ve always found it a genuine honor to be a part of it.

The example of hospitality Abraham offers gives the impression that there’s more going on here than just social convention or obligation. The bread and water would have been enough to satisfy expectations. But Abraham does much more. For him, extending hospitality is more than just his duty; it’s a spiritual discipline.

When we think of spiritual disciplines we tend to think of more contemplative things like prayer or journaling, maybe study of scripture. But some disciplines are active. Hospitality, how we greet and treat guests among us, becomes a spiritual discipline when it opens us up to the presence of God revealed in those we serve. We’re not just serving other people as a courtesy when we practice hospitality; we’re serving God who is present in them. Abraham does that without realizing it, even though we hearers of the story already know who’s really visiting.

Understanding hospitality as a spiritual discipline, practicing prayerful hospitality, is where Martha sort of misses the boat in this story from Luke's gospel. Her mistake isn't that she's doing a lot of things; it's that she's distracted by them. And her distraction, her focus on what she's doing rather than why she's doing it, leads her to resentment. We hear it in her voice when she complains to Jesus about her sister. I know we often hear this story and get the impression that Jesus, or the gospel writer, is devaluing work compared to contemplation. Martha's wrong and Mary is right. But I don't think that's a fair interpretation.

We all know the importance of work in our lives. Whether it's in our homes or here in the church, certain things have to be done or it all falls apart. But there's a big difference between someone setting a plate of food before a guest lovingly and gently, as an act of kindness and slamming the plate down and walking away in a huff. I don't know about you, but I've done both from time to time. I recommend the first. Jesus sees in Martha someone who resents Mary's behavior and lets that resentment spill over into her actions. So, it's not so much what she's doing as how she's doing it.

It's easy to get hung up on form over substance. When Jesus tells Martha she's "worried and distracted by many things," he's pointing out that she's lost sight of the deep meaning, the substance, of her actions. So, she doesn't appreciate their importance. And she finds no satisfaction in the activity. Mary is satisfied. She knows what's important in this moment and is able to give it her full attention. Martha could do that, too. She could approach the work she's doing as sacred, as a form of prayer, and find it fulfilling. Instead she's distracted by how it looks: she's doing all the work and Mary's doing nothing.

But Mary isn't doing nothing. She's listening deeply to Jesus' teachings. Deep listening is also a spiritual discipline meant to bring us to a deeper awareness of God's presence. It's the "better part," not because it doesn't involve activity, but because it's done prayerfully. Mary is putting her whole self into the attention she gives Jesus. Like Abraham, who instead of doing only the bare minimum throws himself into preparing a meal for his guests, Mary is focused on one thing, the only thing that matters in this moment.

It's not easy for any of us to do that. Can you think of a time when you were engaged in an activity that required your full attention? Maybe you were changing a baby's diaper, or writing a note to a friend who is grieving. Maybe you were focused on listening to a piece of music that's special to you and you want to catch every note, every tone. Or maybe you were entertaining guests and making preparations for dinner. When we're really, fully engaged, there's no room for resentment, no place for accusations. When we're truly fulfilled by what we're doing, we no longer mind what others are doing; we're not distracted or worried. We're content. That's when we're most open to and aware of God's presence within us.

The gospel Jesus teaches is meant to bring his disciples into a deeper awareness of how God is present in the world around them. It's not about reciting the right prayers or affirming the right dogmas. Jesus teaches a way of being in the world that makes it possible to see with new eyes and hear with new ears. We see the divine presence everywhere we look and we hear the voice of God in every encounter. That's what he means when he tells his listeners, "the kingdom

of God is within you.” When we more fully embrace the gospel, we carry God’s kingdom into the world, no longer passively waiting for it to arrive, but actively revealing it through our actions toward those around us.

Hospitality, welcoming strangers, providing sustenance and care, is a fundamental expression of God’s kingdom in the world. We are meant to provide for one another in ways that bring wholeness and healing. We’re meant to be fully present in our tasks, to make every action a prayer, so that God’s presence is revealed through us.

And as we learn from Abraham’s story and through activities like Abraham’s Table, that presence is not limited to our faith alone. When we gather at a common table, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, all faiths included, we discover the fullness of God’s presence. Christ is one expression of that fullness, as we hear in the words from Colossians: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” But Torah and the Quran, the Bhagavad Ghita of Hinduism and the Dharmapada of Buddhism, as well as teachings from Native American spirituality, all point to the fullness of God and offer a gateway to a deeper reality.

Our task is to fully embrace our understanding and allow the presence of God to be revealed through what we say and do, through acts of prayerful hospitality as we welcome others who express that presence in different forms. We’re called to bring the enthusiasm of Abraham and the diligence of Martha, as well as the focused attention of Mary to our efforts on behalf of those around us who come seeking refreshment and rest. By seeing in them the very presence of God and responding with compassion and affection, we become the disciples Jesus calls us to be: loving, generous, and full of grace.

Amen