

Lectionary 16 9 Pentecost C
The Rev. Donna M. Wright
St. Matthew's Lutheran Church Kellers Church
July 17, 2016 The Guest

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

Having a guest over requires more work than usual. For guests, I make a fresh meal (not leftovers). When we don't have guests, most meals have some leftovers in them. For guests, I do extra cleaning. And I have Don dust. If the guests are from a long way, I have him dust the tops of the doors and windows and refrigerator. Then he knows it is a big deal. I put away a lot of the papers that are presently on top of the bed in the guest room and on the dining room table. In piles that each have meaning. (Some of you have seen my meaningful piles of paper in my office.) There is always plenty to do, when you have guests. I make lists, but then think of other items as I mark the completed ones off the list. It's easy to get distracted. To be so distracted doing all the chores of hosting, that we forget the point of having a guest over – to enjoy spending time with them, to appreciate their presence.

The desert peoples of Abraham's time knew that a guest could show up at any time. There was a hospitality code, to provide for any guest who came by. We learn in the very first line of the first reading that it is the Lord who came to Abraham on this particular day. But all Abraham knew at first was that there were three men standing near him as he sat at the entrance to his tent. Abraham encouraged them to stay, offering them hospitality. Just a little something to eat. They agreed to stay for a while. Then Abraham did the frantic running about that Martha was probably up to when Jesus showed up, in the gospel story. He hurried to have Sarah make a lot of good bread, to have a servant slaughter a calf and cook it and to bring the guests milks and cheeses and the feast. While they ate, Abraham waited for the news the travelers would share. For guests always bring news. Guests always have something to share. These three were no different. Only their news was not news from far away. Their news was from within Abraham and Sarah's own tent. The news?: by the time the travelers returned on their way, Abraham's wife Sarah would have given birth to a son. More than a surprise. A shock. First, that the strangers would know the name of Abraham's wife. That one of them predicted the birth of a son. Which was not possible. Sarah was too old.

The Lord came to Abraham as guest. And the Lord proclaimed a word of hope and shock and grace and blessing. Within a year the son promised by God to Abram decades before would be born. Abraham had focused on his obligation as host – to encourage travelers to stay and then to provide them with a meal of abundance. He was concerned about the dinner. But the news, the word of the Lord, was more abundant than the feast Abraham's household prepared. When God is guest, the word of God is always more abundant than the meal we provide.

So, too, with Jesus, as he is guest at the home of Martha and Mary. By this time in Luke's gospel, Jesus is well known and I am sure Martha wanted to make a good impression. She had to feed her guests, see to their needs. Especially Jesus' needs. Her sister Mary is attending to only one of Jesus' needs: his need for a listener. Someone to pay attention, as Abraham paid attention to his guests after he served them the meal. Martha interrupts Jesus to demand that Jesus have Mary get up to help her. Jesus does not denigrate Martha's duties; but he does point out both her distraction and Mary's lack of distraction. Jesus said, "Mary has chosen the better part." Not the only good part, but the better part. The part of listening. Of paying attention to what the guest is saying. Which may be more abundant than any food that could be offered. Particularly when God is our guest. For the word that Jesus speaks is grace abundant. Plentiful spiritual nourishment.

Now, you have to invite a guest in. Even when people just drop by, as the travelers did with Abraham, they had to be invited in. In congregations I have served, I would say to the confirmands, if you are having a party after your confirmation and you want me to come, you have to invite me. Otherwise, I will not be there. Now I don't care if you have a party or not. And I don't mind if you don't invite me. Really. But if your parents ask you, "Why isn't Pastor Donna here?" you will have to tell them, "Because I didn't invite her." I can't read minds.

For God to be our guest, we must invite God. For Jesus to come and stay and speak, we must invite him. In all kinds of ways, we are to be attentive to God. Attentive to God's word. God's surprising words and surprising actions. Of saving sinners. Of offering blessing.

It's easy to get distracted being pastor here at St. Matthew's. Even being an interim pastor, with special training and goals and accountability. Here at St. Matthew's I've been paying attention to members and staff, and figuring out the history. I spend time in meetings and preparing for meetings. And following up on meetings. I am reading through the files, looking for policies and information that will not only help me, but the next pastor called to St. Matthew's. I prepare sermons, write letters, plan what we will be doing months ahead of time. I make sure we have an active presence on Facebook and other internet sites. It is easy to lose focus. But the main part of being a pastor is to keep the main thing the main thing in each congregation I am called to serve. And the main thing is to *pay attention to Jesus*. Because if we pay attention to Jesus, all the rest of our ministry will happen. Our time on this earth will come to an end; but our trust in God and God's love for us will never end. We have heard the good news of how much God loves us and everyone. That is the main thing. It is indeed the better part.

Jesus must be our guest. Invited to every conversation and every email. Every Facebook post. Jesus is to be our guest when we form our opinions and share them with our drinking buddies. Jesus should be welcome at the opening of every computer and every Bible and every door. Home door, car door, church door. We are to pay attention to God in our praying and our studying. Our reflecting on how God's abundant word is made real this day, in light of all that has happened in our lives and in the world.

The word of our God is abundant and rich. Given for you. Given for me. Given for our hungry and distracted world. Amen