

Sermon on Luke 1:39-45
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When I was a little girl, sometime during the Christmas season, we would always go to my grandmother's house. Now, I need you to know that this was not one of those "Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go" moments for me. It was more like the dread of a root canal sort of feeling. My grandmother was very proper and liked things just so. Everything (and everyone) in its place. She was stern, and I would even say, cold. And, she was the self-appointed queen of all. As long as everyone understood that and acted accordingly, everything went just fine.

On these Christmas visits, she would get out the lace tablecloth for the very dark mahogany dining room table. She would polish every piece of silver she owned, which numbered somewhere at least in the thousands, I think. She got out the crystal goblets and the bone white china with the little flowers on the edges. She would make tons of food including melt- in-your-mouth white yeast rolls. The table would virtually groan with the weight of the food in the sparkling dishes. And we would all sit down to some of the coldest meals I have ever experienced.

For you see, although my grandmother would make everything look and smell perfect in her estimation, there was no hospitality involved. For with hospitality comes love and a deep desire to know others, a yearning to be with the other. That was not a part of these meals or of her life. Instead, it was about appearances.

Maybe these journeys to grandmother's house are part of the reason that I am so taken with the story of Mary and Elizabeth this year.

Mary has just heard some literally unbelievable news and yet she has found it within herself to believe it. The angel Gabriel has just left her. The air around her has quit glowing with his presence. The sounds have returned to normal. Once her breathing returns to normal, maybe she looked over her shoulders to make sure no one saw that crazy thing.

They might think she had gone around the bend. But then, she realizes she's all alone. All alone with this insane notion.

After hearing this news, Luke tells us that Mary goes "with haste" to visit Elizabeth. We are told nothing about a conversation she might have had with Joseph or with her parents or with her best friend. No, instead, it is important for Luke to tell us that she goes to see her relative, Elizabeth, one who has already heard the news and is pregnant herself with the one who will be John the Baptist.

Surely, there could have been all sorts of reasons for this. But my take today is that Mary went because she needed Elizabeth's hospitality, her non-judging, loving, gentle understanding, her listening ear, her warm embrace. She needed someone to tell her she wasn't crazy.

And Elizabeth is all these things for Mary. Not only does she not judge the young, unmarried pregnant girl, she receives her with delight, and she praises her. She recognizes and affirms that God is bringing about a whole new thing that will not only change Mary, but will also change the world. She praises Mary for her willingness to be open to God's incredible newness.

In turn, Mary is all these things for Elizabeth as well. They create a beautiful, sacred space where love can grow...that's love with a capital L. Jan Richardson says that these two women create a sanctuary (www.theadventdoor.com, 12/14/09). It is in this sanctuary where Mary is able to find her voice and sing her song. And in her song, we hear what it is that God is doing in the world through this baby now growing within her, turning the tables on power, raising up the downtrodden, filling the hungry and sending away the rich. She can only find these words, this understanding, this strength in the midst of Elizabeth's hospitality.

This good news speaks powerfully to us today. In this season, we dress up our houses with Christmas trees and wreaths, with snowmen and Santas, with lights and garlands. We fill our homes with good smells of baking cookies and scented candles. We host parties and slap one another on the back wishing each other "Merry Christmas".

But, do we extend to one another the hospitality of Jesus Christ? Do we allow another person into our home and embrace that person with nonjudgmental, loving, gentle understanding? Do we embrace those who come to us with delight, with a deep desire to hear from that person what he might be experiencing at a very deep level? Do we open our hearts to hear what good new thing God might be about in the other person? Is our hospitality genuine?

I've been reading a book called *Same Kind of Different as Me*. It's a true story told from the perspective of two men, one who has become a very wealthy art dealer and one who went from sharecropping in Louisiana to the streets of Fort Worth, Texas, living as a vagrant. The wealthy white man, Ron, goes to serve dinner at a homeless shelter in Fort Worth because his wife really wants him to. He goes, very reluctantly, and continues to go, only because his wife continues to prod him. She is living from the perspective that from whom much has been given, much is expected. God's love has been poured out on her, and she knows, in turn, she is called to love others, especially those on the margins of society.

Ron eventually meets Denver. Denver is, on the outside, a hardened, cold, violent, man. He has become that way because he finds it easier than caring about himself and others. Ron's wife, Debbie, creates the hospitality that these two men need to penetrate their hearts to the new thing that God is birthing for them. She accepts each one as he is. She loves and cherishes each one as he is. And, eventually, the men become friends. They become brothers. But, it only happens because of Debbie's deep and abiding hospitality.

In the beginning of their very fragile relationship, Ron tells Denver that he wants to be friends. Denver doesn't answer. Several days later, Denver asks Ron if he is a fisherman. Ron responds with confusion. Denver tells him that in his experience, African Americans catch fish and take them home to eat them. But, white folks catch the fish and throw them back, catch and release. And, that's what he, Denver, has experienced from white people since he has been on the streets. They show up at the shelter to serve a few meals and to bring some clothes for the poor people. Then, they go on their way. They engage for a few

weeks, sort of. And then, they are gone. Catch and release. Denver says that if he commits to being Ron's friend, he is not interested in catch and release. He wants it to be forever. Ron agrees. From that time on, the men open their hearts in deep hospitality to one another, nurturing what God is bringing to pass in them.

Will we be catch and release people? Or will we allow ourselves to be open to one another, especially to those who are different than us, offering the hospitality that Mary and Elizabeth give to one another, that God may be born to us?

In these last days of Advent, I pray that finding hospitality in one another, extending hospitality to others, we will sing with Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."
Amen.