

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost Luke 10:38-42

I would like to begin with an excerpt from a short story entitled, “His Name is Glenn” by Tina Foster Caldwell.<sup>1</sup>

*“Come on T.J., let’s get going,” I repeated to my four year old for the umpteenth time. Always, hurrying, always rushing, always late. I balanced the lasagna in one hand, the baby in another, and waved encouragement to my son with my leg. “We’ve got to get this dinner to the homeless people.”*

*On the way to church, T.J. (as always) was shooting rapid-fire questions at me like the press corps attacking the president. “What are homeless people? What do they look like? Why are we taking them dinner? Will they talk to me?” And the most important question, according to T.J. “Do they like trains?” I can’t remember my answers. I’m sure they were vaguely politically and psychologically correct, approved by child-rearing gurus and homeless advocates alike. I’m also sure those answers were unremarkable enough to have made very little impression on a preschooler.*

*Although we arrived at the church late, our guests were later, which led to an anticlimactic moment for my child. “When are the homeless people going to be here?”*

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<sup>1</sup> From Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual life “Welcoming the Stranger.” Volume XVIII, number 5, September/October 2003 pg. 36-38.

*I answered with one of many parental clichés used throughout the ages, “Just be patient, Son.”*

*He quickly became distracted with being four years old and I quickly became distracted with “homemaker” insecurity. Will my lasagna stay warm? Did I make enough? My version of lasagna is often soupy; did this one turn out all right? Will something this rich upset their stomachs? Should I have fixed something blander?*

*Finally, the bus arrived and our guest alighted, filing quietly into the gym. T.J. ran and hid behind my leg, suddenly shy about meeting so many new people all at one time. I felt myself becoming shy—not a natural trait for me—and stuttering wanting to say the right things. Welcome? How was your day? What does one say to someone so far removed from the life my family knows? For as little as I knew to say, our visitors could have been a group of Kurdish refugees with no knowledge of the English language. I was ashamed of myself. After all, I’m from West Virginia, where poverty is no stranger. I worked in a grocery store and used to sneak toiletries into one woman’s grocery bags because I knew her food stamps wouldn’t pay for them. Had I “raised above my raising” so much that I couldn’t communicate with people who were down on their luck? Good grief.*

*I gave up on true communication and opted for silliness, cracking lame jokes as I helped serve dinner. Then seconds. Then thirds. These people were hungry! My self*

*centered concerns about whether they would like the meal or not were a waste of time. They just wanted some good, hot, food and plenty of it. Thankfully, we did have enough and as I watched them fill their stomachs, I felt my heart become equally full.*

*Of course, with the 20/20 vision that comes with hindsight, I see now that we didn't have enough, because we fed only them and not ourselves. I should have been sitting down right beside them, eating my soupy lasagna next to a woman who spent her days on the sidewalks of downtown Nashville. By standing there serving them, I put myself into the role of benevolent benefactor instead of the role a human being willing to break bread with a new friend...*

Let's shift from Tina's story and look for a few minutes at the story of Mary and Martha from our Gospel this morning.

The story begins with Martha welcoming Jesus into her home. Jesus who had been on the road traveling about would have dusty, dirty, hot and sweaty.

Immediately upon entering the house, Martha would have offered Jesus some water, a basin, and a towel to clean up with. She probably even washed his feet and may have anointed him with some sort fragrant oils.

She then would have made herself busy-- preparing a meal and getting Jesus something to drink. Since we know that Jesus didn't travel alone, he probably had his entourage with him. This of course increased Martha's work exponentially.

At the height of her busyness Martha's frustration boils over, frustrated by her sister Mary's lack of help. She has so much to do to get dinner on the table and all Mary does is sit quietly at Jesus' feet- listening to his teaching.

To make matters worse --- Jesus doesn't cut Martha any slack when she complains to him about Mary's behavior. He doesn't say to Mary "Don't you think you might want to give your sister a hand." Instead, he chastises Martha for her anxiety and somewhat cryptically says that Mary sitting attentively at his feet-- has chosen "the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Mary has chosen the better way. This way of course is quite counter to the societal expectations for women at that time. It was expected that women would be doing what Martha was doing, preparing the meals, getting things ready, making sure that the visitors and guests had their needs taken care of. But Jesus says—"hold on" there is something that is more important than making sure physical needs are met.

“Mary has chosen the better part” Mary has chosen to sit at Jesus’ feet. A place where she would hear about his travels, could listen to his teaching, a place where she would hear about the wonderful things that God is doing, through Christ.

But also sitting at Jesus’ feet Mary could offer to Christ herself; she could tell Jesus who she was. And there in the midst of a conversation the possibility relationship could be born, a friendship could occur. Something that Martha was missing out on back in the kitchen- cooking dinner and washing the dishes.

Mary has chosen the better part.

Has Martha put herself into the role that Tina Caldwell describes as “benevolent benefactor?”

Is Jesus pointing out to Martha that somehow she has missed the true point of hospitality? That hospitality perhaps needs to extend beyond meeting of the physical needs of our guests?

The words of Jesus echo cryptically—Mary has chosen the better part.

I remember a few years ago hearing the bishop of Haiti speak at a conference. As many of you know Haiti is one of the poorest nations in

the western hemisphere. In fact, I have heard it describe not as a third world country but as a fourth world country.

Anyway, the bishop was talking about mission partnership between churches in the United States and churches in Haiti.

He said if you have \$4000 for mission work in Haiti send us \$3000 and use \$1000 of that money to come visit Haiti.

He then said if you have \$2000 for mission work in Haiti, send us \$1000 and use the other \$1000 to come visit us.

And he then said, if you have \$1000 for mission work in Haiti, don't send us any of it-- just come and be with us.

Essentially I believe what Bishop Duracin was saying Come, come and get to know us, Come and let us get to know -- begin to build and foster those relationships, that are essential for human life --for there are more important things than being just a benevolent benefactor, there are more important things than just doing something nice for someone else in need.

Mary has chosen the better part. She has chosen the way, the way that leads to relationship.

Let me close by sharing with you the ending of Tina's story:

She continues.

*However, the real lesson I learned came when we were leaving the church.*

*I gathered my family and we were walking toward the door, when one of the guests started walking alongside us. He was going to the restroom. T.J. decided one new person wasn't nearly as intimidating as fifteen, so he piped up, "What's your name?"*

*"Glenn," the gentleman answered. "What's yours?"*

*"T.J." He paused. "Do you like trains?" (This can make or break a relationship with my son)*

*"Yep." Answered Glenn. And he smiled. A snaggle-toothed grin that could have belonged to any grandfather on this earth. He and my beautiful, cherubic child exchanged some more equally pertinent information. Then Glenn walked into the bathroom.*

*On our way home, the barrage of questions flowed forth like a stream. “Where did you say Glenn lives? Why couldn’t we stay and play with Glenn longer? Can we have Glenn over to our house to play?”*

*The pat, vague, politically correct answers wouldn’t come. Instead, I wanted to ask T.J. the questions. How did you do it, Baby. How did you cut through all that stuff floating around in that room and get to the very essence of this whole experiences? What made you think that a tired, hungry, not-so-sweet smelling “homeless” person might be a train loving human being with whom you could connect on a very real level? Was it really as simple as this? Was it as easy as asking the man his name? Next time I’ll find out. But next time I won’t have to ask because my son will remember. His name is Glenn.*

Mary chose the better part. T.J. chose the better part; when Christ comes and sits in our midst will you and I choose the better part?

AMEN