



“Setting the Table”

Deuteronomy 8:10-11, 17-18; Luke 10:38-42;

Romans 1:8-13 (NRSV)

Let's set the table and give thanks.

It's a big occasion. Jesus has come for another visit. He had come often over the years, especially during the three big annual festivals of Passover, Weeks, and Booths. Jesus knew that the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, was always open to him and he often took advantage of it.

But this was certain to be the best-attended visit yet. Jesus had begun revealing himself in village after village, and everyone would want to be around Jesus, even if only to catch a glimpse of him. And they would all need to be fed. This posed no problem for Martha, who was organized, disciplined, and hard-working. She was Type A all the way. As for Mary...well, not so much.

Setting the Table

So Martha has welcomed Jesus into their home. And despite there being much work to do and a meal to prepare, Mary plops herself down at Jesus' feet. This is pretty much how things are with Martha and Mary. On a later occasion, when Jesus comes to Bethany after Lazarus' death, Martha would go out to greet him, while Mary stays in the house (John 11). Still later, Martha would prepare a meal, while Mary wipes Jesus' feet with her hair (John 12).

Can't you picture Martha? For a while she is probably ok with Mary sitting with Jesus rather than helping out. But as time passes and Martha is left with everything, she begins to stew. She bangs the pots a little louder. Cabinets are closed with enthusiasm. Finally, she has had it and marches out to the living room – where she tells Jesus what he must do!! . . . Sound anything like a Thanksgiving or two you've been part of?

With great gentleness, Jesus criticizes Martha. He doesn't rebuke her for the work she is doing, but for her attitude toward Mary. Martha has forgotten that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:3; Luke 4:4). Mary has chosen to focus all her attentions on the “main course” – and Martha ought not criticize her for it. Still, it would be a mistake to be too hard on Martha or to elevate Mary. There is a time to go and do and a time to listen and learn.

I suspect that many of us have little trouble identifying with Martha on Thanksgiving. There is so much to do. Who has time to enjoy the fellowship...there is just so much to do! In a way, this problem goes far beyond the big family dinners. We are often overwhelmed by the frantic pace of our lives and the seemingly endless demands on our waking hours. Who has time to pray? Who has time to read the Bible? For many of us, it is probably easier to wade into our hectic schedules rather than adjust priorities or reconsider our choices.

Stephanie Frey writes, “It is easier, for example, to make a casserole for a grieving family than it is to offer a word of hope in Christ, easier to welcome a new neighbor with a fresh loaf of bread than to invite her to worship...Worship becomes a ‘scheduling problem,’ one that interferes with the ‘one day we can sleep in.’”¹ That stings but how many of us haven't said to ourselves at one time or another, “I just need to take this Sunday off.” Most of us probably run a much greater risk of having a Martha-problem (too much doing) than a Mary-problem (too much listening).

¹ Stephanie Frey is a Lutheran pastor in Minnesota. This is from her reflections on Luke 10:38-42, “Living with Martha,” in *Christian Century*.

But as Frey goes on to say, “The good news is that Jesus the host has granted permission for all distracted, frantic people to sit down and eat their fill of word and promise. When we join them and nourish ourselves at the table, we’ll be ready to put hands and feet, hearts and minds to work.”

Sitting at the table and remembering

Once the preparations are finished and the meal is served, we can sit and remember why we are there – to express our gratitude to God and for one another. You’d think we would always remember to be grateful to the One who made us, but we don’t and it has always been this way. For example...

Today’s passage from Deuteronomy is taken from Moses’ final speech to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land without him. He warns them that in this land of milk and honey it would be very easy to forget God. They would build fine homes. They would grow rich and comfortable. Being human, they would be tempted to stand on the mountaintops shouting for all to hear – “Look what I have done! Behold my accomplishments!” Moses knew how easy it would be for the Israelites to become “full of themselves,” thinking “I did all this. And all by myself. I’m rich. It’s all mine!” How were the Israelites to avoid the temptation to forget God in their affluence and achievement? By keeping God’s commandments, his instructions to them. Every day and in all ways, they were to love God and to love neighbor.

The Thanksgiving holiday is a great time to remember and to embrace anew the thankful hearts that ought to characterize us all year. In his book, *Prayer: finding the heart’s true home*, Richard Foster writes, “Jesus was the ultimate grateful person. The signature written across his heart was the prayer ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth’” (Matthew 11:25). Jesus was of one heart and mind with the psalmist who wrote “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart” (Psalm 9:1) and with the writer of Hebrews, “let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name” (13:15).

And Jesus was of one heart and mind with the apostle Paul, who wrote “I thank God for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (Romans 1:8) in the introduction to his letter to the believers in Rome. Paul is truly thankful for all those who are part of his new family, his family in Christ. Though he knows some of the Christians who have now returned to Rome, he doesn’t know most of the community. But he is thankful for them. He knows that when he finally comes to Rome, he will be encouraged by their faith, as I’m sure he was despite the circumstances of his arrival.²

Likewise, Paul is thankful for the Christians in Colossae:³ “In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.” He urges them to be thankful, living out the new selves that they are in Christ.

Paul is thankful for the Christians in Thessalonica: “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thess. 1:2).

He is similarly thankful for the Christians in Corinth and in Philippi. Paul’s thankfulness for all these people shines through his letters despite their many problems and issues.

As we still do and always shall, these first Christians would gather at the table to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, reminding themselves that they had more for which to be grateful than they had ever imagined. As we gather with our families and friends this year, may we be grateful people of one heart and mind with our Lord.

² Paul doesn’t get to Rome until the early 60’s AD, and then it is as a prisoner of Rome. Though under house arrest, Paul was surely able to spend much time with the Christians in Rome.

³ Colossae was a city in southwestern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). By Paul’s day it was a city in decline, helped along by a calamitous earthquake in 60 or 61 AD.