

Lord, open our hearts to receive your gift to us today. Amen.

I love to give dinner parties. A real dinner party to me is a sit-down meal for six to ten people, with at least three courses, really good food, elegantly served, sparkling conversation. Hot dogs for 15 on the deck is fun, but it's not a "real" dinner party.

Part of the fun of a dinner party is planning: What will I serve? Shall I try something new? How will I decorate the table? The blue table cloth or white lace? What napkins? The Italian candleholders, or crystal? Often I tie the napkins up with a beautiful ribbon and tuck in a sprig of rosemary. Martha Stewart's got nothing on me when I get going.

What I want is for my guests to be delighted – eyes, noses, taste buds, to know that I cared enough for them to make food not only good and nutritious, but beautiful, lovely to taste, luxurious. To know they were anticipated and prepared for. That's what opens people's spirits up and makes for a great party. That's the heart of good hospitality, making space for people's spirits to open.

And what about the guests? There is often a person or couple I've been wanting to have over, and I build the guest list around them. I might invite people who don't know each other, who I think will hit it off.

When a party clicks there is good conversation around the table late into the evening, amid the dessert dishes and coffee cups, a serious discussion, punctuated by a good laugh now and then. If the guests stay a long time, I know it was a good evening, that the food and drink, the environment, and the company all worked to soothe people's spirits and open them up to one another. It's not unlike planning worship...

But here's a little secret: I'm not always a participant in these events. Sometimes I am so busy bustling, carrying dishes back and forth, flambéing bananas or making more coffee, that much of the conversation passes me by. Sometimes I shout something from the kitchen, and then realize no one heard me; I'm not in the conversation. I'm so busy trying to create an environment of blessing for my guests, I sometimes miss out on it.

Can anyone out there relate to that? Our lessons today suggest that I stand in a solid Biblical tradition. I think Sarah from the Old Testament, and Martha from the New might have a thing or two to add to this conversation. What if I invite them to dinner, right now? Hmm... Since this is just us girls, we won't make anything fancy, maybe just a nice salad with fresh tomatoes and cucumbers from my garden. A quiche with red peppers and bacon. Oh, wait, my guests are Jewish. Let's make that goat cheese. And a warm loaf of fresh-baked bread, where the steam rises from it when you break off a piece... And a blue ceramic dish with black olives, and maybe another of hummus... Cold, clear lemon water – or wine if they want it. Oh, and you're invited too, if you'd like to join us.

Martha speaks first. "It's nice to be served dinner for a change," she says. Sarah agrees. "I never counted how many meals I prepared in how many places. And it's not like I ever had a kitchen. We were always in a tent, always on the move. Always the promise of land to settle on. But I learned to set up quickly and get the meals out. Just because you're in a tent doesn't mean you don't have to provide good hospitality."

I can tell Sarah is not a paper-plate kind of girl. She goes on, "When those three men came that day, Abraham ran to meet them. We didn't get many visitors in Mamre. He begged them to stop, to rest with us. He brought water for their feet, and offered them bread – bread we did not have. I had to make it then and there."

That stops Martha. "You're kidding! I didn't have a lot of notice that Jesus was coming to the house with all his disciples, but at least I had some bread on hand." Sarah said, "Not me. Abraham ran in, 'Quick, take three measures of flour, knead it and make cakes.' Like I didn't know how to make bread?" We look at each other and roll our eyes a little at the folly of men.

"He went out and got a calf, had the servant kill and prepare it. It too awhile, but when it was ready, Abraham took it all out and served them." Martha sits up. "You mean he helped you? I was on my own. My sister was there, of course, and you'd think she might have lifted a finger with all those people there, but she just plunked herself down in front of Jesus and soaked in what he had to say. It sounded interesting, what I could hear from the kitchen, but— "

Now it's Sarah's turn to be surprised. "She stayed in there with all the men?" "I couldn't drag her away," said Martha.

"Women did not eat with men in my day," Sarah said.

"Abraham stood with them while they ate, and I stayed in the tent, just listening behind the entrance, to make sure everything was okay."

"Oh yeah," I throw in,

"You were in the tent when they made their announcement, weren't you?"

I refill their wine glasses while Sarah tells the story:

"Oh, it sounds so silly to repeat it. It sounded silly then –

and it would sound silly now, had it not turned out to be true.

Martha: "What was it?"

Sarah: "They asked where I was, and Abraham said I was in the tent.

It's almost like they knew I was listening, because one said, 'I'll be back next year, and your wife Sarah will have a son.'"

"What's so silly about that?" Martha asks.

"My dear, we were old! Ancient. I was way past menopause. It was ridiculous.

I laughed my head off – I'm old, my husband's old, and now I'm supposed to have the pleasure of a child? When I can't even chase him down the path?

I said it right out loud, it's ridiculous."

I agree that it sounded unlikely, but Martha is quiet,

like she's had some experience with God's amazing ways.

Sarah goes on, "I guess the men heard me laugh, because they asked Abraham why I did. And that man said, 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?'

And he said that he'd be back and I would have a son. And then they left."

"What a gift," I say. "When you weren't expecting one."

Sarah says, "I don't offer hospitality expecting gifts.

I put the meal out, let them eat it, and when they're gone, I clean up."

Martha interrupts "Well, I want a little more from it than that –

I want to give to my guests. That day Jesus came to my house,

I wanted him to have a wonderful time and to be refreshed and rested when he went back to his travels. That's why Mary irritated me so much. It was so selfish.

She only seemed interested in what she could get from Jesus, not what she could offer him. But when I asked him to say something to her about it,

he acted like I was in the wrong. Not at all what I expected."

“Hmmm,” I say. “Seems like when God comes to visit, unexpected things happen.” Martha nods, “I just wanted everything to be perfect for him, you know?”

It was hard enough to invite him, and when he said yes I had to really scramble.

I got a lamb and roasted it with some garlic – ”

“And some mint and yogurt?” Sarah asks.

“Oh yes, it was very moist. I baked fresh bread and cut up some tomatoes...

and set the table – we couldn’t eat on laps when he was the guest of honor.

“So I’m rushing around, and I see Mary just sitting there like one of the men, listening to him teach. I kept dropping hints... ‘Mary, why don’t you get the Teacher some water, and the rest of us too, while you’re at it?’

But she didn’t move! As if she was one of his disciples. Made us all look bad.

Finally I thought, maybe she’ll listen to him.

I interrupted, took the Master aside and said, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister is leaving me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”

“But he just said to me, ‘Martha, Martha...’ – just like that, he said my name twice.

‘Martha, why are you fretting? You are worried and distracted by many things.

You only need one. Mary has chosen the better part, and I will not take it from her.’

The better part – well, I can see how it might be better to sit on your rear end and take in Jesus’ wonderful teaching, but we can’t all spend our lives doing that.”

Sarah laughs,

“He would have been one hungry man that day if you’d done the same!”

Martha persists, “I didn’t want more for myself.

I just wanted it to be perfect for him, and I needed her help. But Jesus – ”

She falls silent. I let the silence sit awhile; sometimes a good host needs to do that.

I put out some beautiful peaches for dessert, and eat a slice,

licking the juice off my fingers. Martha takes her time. Sarah and I just wait.

Then she speaks again. “I’ll tell you a secret,” she said,

“Something that Jesus said to me that didn’t make it into the story as

Luke told it. It’s something Jesus said to me in the kitchen.

He said he wanted me, us, to receive his love, the fullness of his blessing.

That’s what he would consider a perfect party.

And I said, ‘Lord, this is enough, just to have you in my house. I don’t need more.’

But he said,

‘Martha, what you think is enough isn’t even a fraction of what I want for you.’

He said, 'Mary has chosen to take my most precious gift, myself, to follow me.

I will not take that away just so she can serve me.'

'But Lord, it's an honor to serve you. I don't mind the work...'

He stopped me. He said, 'I won't always be here.

Take the opportunities to sit with me when you have them.'

Martha shakes her head, remembering her own stubbornness.

"And again I argued with him – I said, 'But I stay close...

I can hear you from the kitchen. And someone needs to cut the bread,
chop the vegetables, take out the roast, make the gravy.'"

He just looked at me and said it again,

'What you think is enough isn't a fraction of what I want for you.'

I said, 'You want me to come and sit too?' He just smiled.

'Can I go turn the spit so the meat won't burn?'

He didn't answer. Then he said, 'I want you to trust the meat to me.'

Sarah says, "So did you sit?" Martha: "I did, for awhile. I learned a lot. My sister
and I, we understood who Jesus really was, even before a lot of the men."

I ask her, "Did you learn to slow down? To sit with Jesus more?"

Did Mary learn to do more?"

"Nope – we were still who we were. She was always more devotional than me.

But I did learn that when it's God who's coming to dinner, God's the one
offering the gift, and the best part is to receive it, not try to out-give God."

"Oh boy," Sarah says. "I guess you could say I learned that too.

We offered the Lord some bread and a few steaks;

God gave us the gift of a son when we'd given up on the possibility."

And I say, "Wow. When has God come to my house for dinner?"

And what did I miss while I was bustling around?"

They both look at me like I'm a little dense.

"God's here right," they say. "And you haven't missed a thing."

Well, my friends, God is here right now with us.

We don't call this a dinner party – we call this church.

But that's what it is – when we gather together, it's a party,

a family party at which guests and friends are always dropping in.

What we do every Sunday is gather here for a feast, one we call Eucharist,

at which Jesus is not only the guest of honor, but the Host himself.

And we bustle a lot – we write sermons, prepare bulletins, rehearse hymns;
the altar guild fixes the flowers and lays out the linen and the silver
and does the dishes when it's all over.

We fret when something's not right, like we have to make it perfect for God.

And God is saying, "No, no, no, friends. You've got it backward.

I have called you together so I can make it perfect for you.

What you think is enough isn't even a fraction of what I want for you.

Use this time to listen to me, and get to know each other. Let me bless you."

And what we can do is be like Mary, and sit, drinking in his presence.

Not coming here to do, but coming to be – maybe the only place in our lives
where we can be defined by who we are, not by what we do.

As we contemplate what it means to open our doors and our hearts to more and
more people, what it means to offer radical hospitality, we need to learn to be.

If we're all about doing, we're not available for relationship,

and that's the heart of hospitality, offering relationship, creating community.

Come here like a dinner guest – expect to be well fed and entertained,

to enjoy each other's company and that of our Great and Mighty Host.

That's what church is about. An Anglican priest and poet from the 16th century,
George Herbert, knew this well. Listen to his beautiful words:

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning, If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here: Love said, You shall be he.

I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,

I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: So I did sit and eat.

Amen.

Luke 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Genesis 18:1-15

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."