

It's quite the sandwich we get to eat today. Our first lesson from Genesis and the gospel reading from Luke are like pieces of bread that are saturated with what *seems* to be ordinariness, stories about food and social gatherings. And the middle reading from Colossians is a meat, cheese, vegetable, sauce concoction that is an experience of ecstatic extraordinariness, a highfalutin culinary delight.

The story from Genesis takes us to Abraham who is at the entrance of his tent in the middle of the afternoon in the height of summer. Three men come walking by his home. Travelers, visitors, people who were passing by would not have been unusual at the time. And responding to the foreigners and strangers would have been a common expectation. Hospitality was no small matter. In fact, it was an honor to provide hospitality to strangers. "My Lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. I want to help you out. Providing hospitality to you is a gift to me. I'll get you some water for your feet and a little bread to eat."

Well, that little bit of hospitality isn't enough. Calling his wife into service—my wife can relate to this—Abe then provides them a seven-course meal. I don't know how he did this all so quickly, but he takes one of the best calves from the flock and cooks it up for his visitors, giving them also cheese and milk, in other words, the very best. Visitors, strangers, foreigners—they are to get the very best.

Hospitality to the stranger, to the visitor—well, it's just what you do. And it's a matter of joy, for you never really know whom you will be entertaining and what will happen because of that entertainment. What the story tells us is that this visit to Abraham is a visit from God. And what the visit brings is good news from God. You are going to have a baby, Abraham and Sarah. What you have been longing for is coming

to fruition. Without the hospitality, Abe and Sarah probably wouldn't have heard the good news. Ordinariness is penetrated by the extraordinary.

You never know what's going to happen when you open up your home. You never know what hospitality might mean for you. You never know what visitors and foreigners might bring to you. You never know what might transpire as you share meals with other people.

Oh, but my cooking isn't stellar! Oh, but my home is a mess! We are living in a time when our homes are not, as I like to put it, an experience of the gospel, the good news, but an experience of the law, a burden that reveals how we don't measure up. So we don't invite. We don't welcome. And that can be true for churches as well. Some folks have claimed that church buildings are some of the most underused facilities in our communities. Just think what we miss out on when we don't do the ordinary thing of providing a little food and water for the stranger or the foreigner. Yes, we may protect our building, but we might miss out on, as the book of Hebrews puts it, entertaining angels without being aware of it.

The Abraham story is the top piece of bread in our sandwich. The bottom piece of bread—our reading from the gospel—like the Abraham story is also about the home and the entertainment that takes place there. It is another encounter with ordinary life. In this story from Luke, we are told that Jesus and *they* (the seventy he has just called into ministry?) are on their way, to Jerusalem, we assume. While on their way, he and perhaps they are welcomed by Martha into her home. After she welcomes them, she starts doing what every good host would do at the time; she begins creating a welcoming meal. Visitors matter. They are to be treated with great care. You are to go over the top in making sure they feel welcome.

During the food preparation, Martha notes that her sister isn't helping out at all. She's just sitting on the couch listening to Jesus. So a little family feud ensues. And as is typical, when anger is felt toward one person, another person gets the projection. "Jesus, don't you care about me and how hard I am working, while my sister is lollygagging around? Would you mind telling her to get to work." And by the way, if Martha is being asked to serve not just Jesus but the seventy who are accompanying him, I can understand why she might be ticked off.

All of this sounds normal, very ordinary. A home. Company. Meals. Distractions. Anxiety. Sibling rivalry. Arguments. We've all been there, done that. This bottom piece of the bread we recognize. But in the midst of the recognizable, Jesus points to that which is too often unrecognized. In the midst of the ordinary, he highlights the extraordinary. Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary, who is listening to me, understands that one necessary thing."

You and I live in an age of distraction and in an era of anxiety. Jonathan Haidt on his book **The Anxious Generation** tells us that this is especially true for our children. The stats seem to suggest that the children of the current era have alarming rates of depression and anxiety. Ordinary daily life is becoming more difficult for so many of them and us.

Let's be honest. We are distracted by so many things--call them social media, smart phones, 24-hour-news stations, high *and* low expectations, perfectionism, all the things we can become addicted to. Call them alcohol, online gambling, and the possessions that can arrive at our doorsteps within a day through Amazon. We are so distracted that too often we miss out on what really matters, the one needful thing.

I suspect that whoever wrote Colossians, Paul or more than likely, one of his disciples, wanted to point his readers or listeners to the one needful thing. His audience was probably distracted by too many things.

What we get in today's sandwich in its middle is some extraordinary stuff. In it, we leave behind the ordinariness of family life, food, and feuding, and we are taken to the meaning of all things, to the beginning of all things, to what holds all things together, to what unites the church. Listen to the extraordinary language of Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.

Wow! We have left behind the small potatoes stuff. We are being taken to the time before the big bang. We are staring at what life means. We are being stuck to the glue that holds everything together. We are being enchanted by that which brings everybody (Jew and Gentile) together in one body. We are encountering that which is bigger than death. We are rubbing up against that which puts distraction and anxiety into their proper place.

Distracted by many things, anxious about everything, we miss out on so much that is life giving, that which puts everything in perspective. We miss out on the meat, cheese, vegetable, sauce concoction that is an experience of ecstatic extraordinariness. Mary didn't, though. She chose the better part.

Hey, you don't get Jesus stopping by on any old day. If he is in your house, you ought to pay attention to him. If the one who reveals to us the invisible God, if the one in whom the fullness of God was

pleased to dwell shows up at your door, it is worth your while to sit at his feet and learn from him. It's not that the food and the hospitality don't matter. Of course, they do. Don't run from providing them. But what really matters is the hospitality of the heart, an openness to be captured by something bigger than all the distractions and the anxieties, something that provides meaning, something that gives direction, something that links you to other people, something that helps you deal with that which unsettles everything—death.

I think that the church is at its best when it takes you and me to that *something*. Oh, without a doubt, we can become a distraction for many and a means for contributing to their anxiety. But the gift given to us is the love that puts everything in perspective, the love that begins it all and ends it all, the love that unites everybody and everything, the love that is larger than death. It is this love that is the one thing that matters. It is this love that is to be discovered in the middle of lives penetrated by ordinariness.

My hope is that it is *this* love that is the church's preoccupation, the “real meal” that the church has to serve. And if it is, it is worth your while spending time with us, studying with us, eating with us, learning with us, putting aside all the distractions and anxieties, joining with us as we together sit at the feet of Jesus and are captured by what really matters.