

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

Luke 10:38-42

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By Steven E. Albertin

38Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40But 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." 41But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42there is need of only one thing.

Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

DIAGNOSIS: The Terrifying Dinner Guest

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Worried and Distracted*

How would you feel if someone said to you, "Guess who's coming to dinner? The President of the United States!" . . . or insert the name of any other celebrity or person you admire and want to impress? Whatever the reason and whoever they are, we want to make a good impression on those we admire. Get out the good china. Unpack the best linens. Use the best recipes. Wear our finest clothes. Determined to impress and honor our guest, we

are determined to do our best.

That surely was the intent of Mary and Martha upon receiving Jesus into their home. However, they responded in dramatically different ways. Martha scurried about fussing in the kitchen making sure that everything was in order. However, Mary sat at Jesus' feet, focused on his every word, oblivious to the typical hospitality that one would offer a guest like Jesus.

We expect Jesus to applaud Martha for her conscientious hospitality. She was doing her duty and honoring her guest. We expect Jesus to criticize Mary for idly sitting around not doing her part to welcome a guest. Surprisingly, Jesus criticizes Martha and compliments Mary. Martha is "worried and distracted by many things" and overlooking the "one thing" that matters, "the better part," that Mary has grasped.

Just like Martha, often our work and vocation become burdens that weigh us down and obligations that we resent. We sense that something is missing in life. We lack the "one thing" that truly ought to matter and make life satisfying.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *All about Me*
Martha's hospitality should have been focused on welcoming her guest. The preparations should have been a joy and privilege, a gift to someone she loved and valued. However, her complaint about her sister reveals the bitterness and resentment that lurk in her heart. She is "distracted by her many tasks" because all she can think of is ME. "Lord, do you not care that MY sister has left ME to do all the work by MYself. Tell her then to help ME." She cannot get beyond herself because she is concerned only about herself. She is convinced that she must DO something to impress Jesus and win his approval. Afflicted with the primeval sin of Adam, she believes that Jesus does not care about her and all she has done. Therefore, she is certain that she must earn

his favor. However, she can never seem to do enough to assuage her doubts. She cannot win Jesus' approval. She resents that her sister doesn't share her commitment to please Jesus.

Martha's deepest problem is that she resents God for not giving her what she thinks she deserves. She is a classic example of the Augsburg Confession's description of Original Sin: She is without "fear and love of God" and filled with "concupiscence," i.e. unable to trust that God loves her, and therefore she is obsessed with proving her value and worth. As such, she represents us all: unable to rid ourselves of the worry and distraction that continually remind us that we have not done enough to please God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Just Desserts*

"Guess who is coming to dinner? GOD . . . in the person of Jesus!" That ought to make sinners shake in their shoes. It certainly shook up Martha. Unsettled, distracted, and worried, Martha gets exactly what she believed she would get: the critic and judge who exposes her for the self-centered worry that lurks in her heart.

We get the God we deserve as long as we believe that God will only love those who deserve it. As long as we believe that we must prove ourselves worthy of our dinner guest, we must live with the worry and fear that we will never measure up. Already, in that experience of worry and fear we are getting our "just desserts" and a foretaste the final judgment when "the better part" will be taken from us.

The picture is not pretty. The taste is not sweet.

PROGNOSIS: The Comforting Dinner Host

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Surprising Reversal*

Jesus realizes Martha's predicament. Stuck in her worry and fear, convinced that Jesus is the intimidating dinner guest she can never hope to please, Jesus must convince her otherwise. Jesus reverses roles. He decides not to be the guest but the host. He calls out Martha's name twice, not to criticize her but to get her attention and redirect it to Mary.

Mary gets it. She "has chosen the better part." She understands that Jesus is not the dinner guest who needs to be impressed. Rather, Jesus is the host who welcomes guests to his dinner table. There Jesus "feeds" his guests with his life-giving word. There guests like Mary sit at his feet and "listen" to his promise. All are welcome at this table.

Jesus has invited the most unlikely of guests to dinner. Despite the skeletons in our closets, the sins that haunt us, the shames that embarrass us and our pretentious attempts to impress Jesus,... guess who is coming to dinner? We are! At this table we dine on the one thing that matters: the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus. Here at last is "the one thing needful."

Throughout the rest of the Gospel of Luke, we see Jesus offer himself to those who are worried and distracted. He refuses to reject them. Even as Jesus hangs on the cross, despised and rejected by those who refused to let him love them, he forgives them. He calls out their names (as he did to Martha). . . at the table, the font and from the gathered assembly . . . offering them "the one thing," "the better part" that will never be "taken away" from them: a place at God's table . . . forever. Jesus' resurrection proclaims that not even death could thwart this promise to the Marthas of this world.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Confident and Focused*

Marthas become Marys. We Marthas join Mary, sitting at Jesus'

feet, listening to his word, trusting his assurance that we have a place at his table and realizing that we no longer need to impress Jesus and the God in whose name he comes. We are not “worried” about having done enough to impress Jesus. Confident of who and whose we are, no longer “distracted by (our) many tasks,” realizing that we are “in need of only one thing” the love of God, we are no longer distracted. We no longer fidget and fuss, worried about getting everything right. We know that we are “right” with Jesus. Relaxed and at peace, we sit with Mary at his feet focused on his every word confident that we have “chosen the better part.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Inviting the World*
In a world where everyone is “worried and distracted,” concerned with making a good impression and winning the approval of others, we live self-forgetfully focused on the needs of others. In a world where hidden beneath every gesture of hospitality is an obsession with status and privilege, we Marys and Marthas of Jesus’ kingdom get to welcome all to God’s table.

Guess who’s coming to dinner? We get to tell the world through our words and deeds, “YOU are!”

There is no hidden agenda or ulterior motive. All are invited and welcome. We get to extend that invitation even through the “many tasks” of our daily work. There we serve the neighbor not with an eye toward impressing them—or God. We serve simply because they need our help and we want them to join us at God’s table at the feet of Jesus. We are no longer worried about how we are doing. We simply welcome the world into our lives and thereby welcome Jesus . . . joyfully, generously, and without complaint.