

When God Comes Calling

Genesis 18:1-10a

Luke 10:38-42

“Now as they went on their way, he 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.”

With the heat index soaring politically as well as literally this past week, the story of Jesus being welcomed into the home of Martha and Mary caused me to turn off the television, put down the newspaper, quit the internet and sit at the Lord’s feet with Mary, as it were, by rereading the whole of Luke’s Gospel. No doubt because of our Genesis text, I found myself reading with an eye open and an ear cocked to the way Luke’s characters received or rejected the God who comes calling. According to Jesuit scholar Brendan Byrne, “Luke sees the whole life and ministry of Jesus as a visitation on God’s part to Israel and to the world. From the start,” Byrne goes on, “this raises the question, how will this guest, this visitor be *received*? The crucial point is that those who do receive him find that he brings them into a much *wider* sphere of hospitality: the ‘hospitality of God.’”

What I first noticed was the humility and the surprise that marked each character who received the God who comes calling. To name a few, there is Mary who responds to Gabriel’s visitation and Jesus’ conception with astonishment: “How can this be?” And Elizabeth who entertains Jesus in utero as she opens her home to Mary for three months and then exclaims with incredulity, “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” The shepherds, Simeon, Anna: all humbled and surprised. Simon Peter, initially undone by the abundance of his catch when God comes calling, falls to his knees and confesses, “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man!” The Gentile centurion exclaims, as Jesus comes near, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof...only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” There is a woman in the city who crashes a dinner party, stands behind Jesus weeping, and bathes his feet with her tears and a woman suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years who touches the fringe of his cloak, trembles when she is identified and falls down before him. Martha invited Jesus into her home for a feast while Mary humbly sat at his feet. In Jericho, Jesus asks to stay at the home of a hated tax collector named Zacchaeus. His humility and amazement in Jesus’ presence turn his life clean around. At the end, Joseph of Arimathea receives Jesus’ dead body and offers him the same final hospitality all of us will be given: a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. We do well to remember that these characters did not have two thousand years of theology telling them that the stranger who had come calling was the Christ of God. “He came as one unknown,” to borrow Albert Schweitzer’s famous line. In Luke’s Gospel, humility and surprise mark those who receive the God who comes calling in the guise of Jesus.

What, then, of the characters who reject the God who comes calling? By and large they are marked by anger and fear and (I hesitate to say) name-calling, reminding us that “hospitality” is, in and of itself, a loaded word. Translated literally, it means “love of a stranger,” but the *root* (*hostis*) of the Latin root (*hospes*) takes stranger to mean enemy (hostility/hospitality). Jesus’ hometown congregation in Nazareth is initially amazed “at the gracious words that came from his mouth” until he names the length and breadth and height and depth of God’s hospitality that includes their enemies. Hospitality turns to hostility, whose underside is fear, as they run him out of town. On another sabbath, Jesus enters a synagogue and heals a man with a withered hand. In response, the religious authorities “were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.” At a dinner party, Jesus is in the midst of unloading on the Pharisees around the table for their hypocrisy when a lawyer whines, “Teacher, when you say all these things you insult us too.” In that case, Jesus continues, “Woe to you lawyers,” causing both Pharisees and lawyers “to be hostile to him and to lie in wait for him.” Sometimes the gospel is bad news before it is good. Once Jesus enters Jerusalem, the hostility increases exponentially, culminating in the crowd chanting, “Away with this fellow....Crucify him!” But in addition to the anger and fear, you cannot help but notice “the labels” “One particular aspect of human response that inevitably interests Luke,” Byrne says, “concerns... ‘the label’ human beings are so prone to impose on those whom they regard as disturbing, alien or threatening.” Again and again, these authorities stand at a distance and judge the “sinners and tax collectors” who receive him. They complain to his disciples saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” The Pharisee whose dinner party is crashed by a woman from the city says to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a

sinner.” As a crowd gathered to hear Jesus teach, “The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Anger, fear and name-calling mark those who reject the God who comes calling in the guise of Jesus.

When I turned the television back on, opened the paper and clicked on the internet, with Luke as my interpretive screen, what struck me more than ever before was the fact that all of us think we are the ones numbered among the humbled and surprised when God comes calling while “they” are the ones who are angry and afraid and calling us names. To wit: evangelical Christians talk about their belief that God has come calling in the person of the President who is reviled and feared by the coastal elites while progressive Christians believe God has come calling in the immigrant who is reviled and feared by white nationalist Christians, all of us opening our Bibles for warrant. No doubt there were similar divisions in Luke’s time swirling around the early church’s inclusion or exclusion of Gentiles and the synagogue’s rejection or acceptance of Jesus as Messiah. Just read the Book of Acts! But on this weekend when we remember that astounding picture of the earth taken from the moon, I imagine God watching his children of privilege from a distance as we call one another names, while God’s children on the margins all over the world are dying for want of some tangible evidence that Christ’s one, holy, catholic and apostolic body is alive and coming to call on any who are in extremis. You and I can argue until we are blue in the face about how to secure our borders. But as Christ’s church, our mandate in the meantime is to represent Christ’s love, to come calling on those who have been abandoned by the powers and principalities.

So once again, I turned off the television, put the paper out for recycling, powered down my computer and returned to the exact middle of Luke’s Gospel where Luke uses the occasion of a dinner party at the house of a prominent religious leader to have Jesus say some pretty direct things about the wider hospitality of the God who has come calling in the guise of an itinerate teacher. Again, it is the sabbath and a leader of the Pharisees is the host. The guests, Luke says, are watching Jesus closely. After provocatively healing an interloper who had dropsy, Jesus tells the guests a parable about sitting at the lowest place when invited to dinner because those who exalt themselves shall be humbled and those who humble themselves shall be exalted. He instructs them not to invite friends to their tables who can pay them back but to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. He follows with another story about another dinner party when those first invited were full of excuses and declined the invitation. So the host tells the slave to go into the streets and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. Is this what Mary heard, I wonder, as she sat at Jesus’ feet while Martha labored alone in the hot kitchen? “The great question,” Byrne reminds us, “is, who will accept the ‘acceptance’ and who will not....This,” he repeats “is the issue around which the drama of Luke’s Gospel turns.” It is also the issue around which the drama of our lives together is turning.

At the exact center of his Gospel, Luke’s Jesus is telling us, if we mean to be Christ’s church, to get over ourselves, to get out of ourselves and to get into the streets to invite the forgotten to the table of grace. Invite only those who have no chance, even in hell, of repaying the favor, he says: the refugee who will never again be reunited with her parents, the kid who has spent his last stolen dollar on a bag of heroin, the mother evicted from her apartment because she lost her job when her child fell ill and they had no health insurance. Invite the beggar on Walnut Street leaning against the Stuart Weitzman store and his dog, the miner forgotten in a holler of West Virginia whose lungs are black as coal, the prisoner picking up trash on I-95, the about to be deported undocumented worker bent over from picking the vegetables you will be serving tonight for dinner. But invite them not for the charity recipients that they appear to be in this present order: invite them for the angels they are in the reign of the God who comes calling, the God who has sent them to you for your own redemption. Invite the stranger because only in this way does God come calling to invite you, with them, to the table where love reigns.

Then maybe, just maybe church will begin to happen, in spite of our politics, wherever children and women and men practice that joyful reversal of human ordering that is God’s hospitality: the first scrambling to be last, the rich become poor, neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, none enslaved, all free and one in Christ. Likely we will refuse the invitation to the table given the guests, offering some lame excuse or will busy ourselves in the kitchen. The good news can therefore only be this: God keeps come to call on us in Christ who is a vulnerable guest in the world as we have ordered it, humbling himself to become the Almighty powerless host whom we can never repay for the love he has lavished on our poor, crippled, lame and blind selves. He is the hospitable space God has created eternally in God’s love for the whole human running race. Thanks be to God. Amen.