"Paying Attention to Hospitality: Present Over Perfect,"
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 10/25/26

A conversation on the long-running food podcast The Sporkful caught my attention earlier this week. Host Dan Pashman was talking to Top Chef judge Gail Simmons about her new book *Guesting: How to Show Up, Win Over Your Host, and Make the Most of Any Occasion*. Explaining why she wrote the book not about being a host but instead about how to be a guest, Simmons said: "It's very easy to entertain yourself with a screen these days and never leave your house or get out of your sweatpants. And I am very anti that. I think we all need to get out, be together, gather, but we don't all have to take on being the host all the time. In fact, we are all guests in a million places all the time. So if we just learn to do it a little better, think about it a little more intentionally and contribute and be additive to every scenario we're in, I think that not only obviously will we put better vibes out into the world, but we will reap the benefits of deeper relationships and happier lives."[1]

Gail Simmons is not imagining that we are all spending more time at home in our sweatpants. According to a recent survey, the average American spends, per day, 100 minutes more time at home than they did in 2003. That's nearly two hours a day that we used to be somewhere else – including at other people's homes – that we now are in our own homes. Doing what? If you're a parent, you're probably spending more time with your kids than your parents did: for example, the average millennial dad spends more than twice as many minutes a day with his kids than the average baby boomer dad did a generation ago.

And, as our technology has gotten more personalized, we are probably spending some good portion of that two extra hours a day at home watching tv or short-form videos algorithmically designed to keep our attention. As journalist and watcher of sociological trends Derek Thompson put it in a recent piece entitled "You Are No Longer Invited to Dinner:" quote, "Everybody might prefer, in the abstract, a world of dinner parties, neighborhood friendships, and spontaneous gatherings. But on any given Wednesday at 7:45 pm, it is easier to look at a screen than to host a party; easier to listen to a podcast while doing yoga than to plan a gathering."[2]

Whatever the reasons are, there's no denying we're spending less time together than we used to. In 1975, 42% of Americans said they entertained at home at least once a month. In 2026, only 19% of people said the same, less than half. Derek Thompson and Gail Simmons want to encourage us to get off our phones and get together. They recognize how important human connection is for our personal wellbeing – and also our societal wellbeing. What happens to us, personally, collectively, politically, when we're all sitting at home alone in our media silos? Wouldn't it be better to have the deeper relationships and happier lives that come from spending more time together?

But Simmons and Thompson also recognize that getting together isn't always easy. As Thompson says, at 7:45 pm on a weeknight when you're tired after a long day of work, it's easier to scroll your phone than to plan the logistics for a dinner party. And in The Sporkful podcast episode, Gail Simmons also noted that we have this cultural expectation for hosts sometimes, that they should be martyrs – martyrs falling on their swords to make everything perfect for their guests. Disappearing into the kitchen, slaving away, maybe never sitting down to enjoy the company of their guests – rather, working hard behind the scenes to make everything perfect so that others can have a nice time. Simmons suggests that instead of martyring ourselves when we are hosting, we should be missionaries instead – out in the mix with guests, leading the fun, getting others in the spirit. No need to be a martyr on the altar of perfection.

The story we just read from the gospel of Luke is a living parable of sorts. These five verses about a homeowner named Martha and her sister Mary have been interpreted in many ways over the centuries as readers have pulled out different takeaways at different times, reflecting both shifting cultural expectations of women and changing cultural practices for hosting others in our homes. But as I read this story this week, it struck me: "Martha is a martyr." One of those people who slaves away in the background so that everything will be perfect for her guests. And who could be a more important guest than Jesus, whom she calls Lord?

There seems also to be some simmering tension between Martha and her sister Mary. We can hear Martha's pent-up resentment when she asks Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" Here I am, scurrying around to get everything done, while she just sits there. Typical! In Martha's defense, the work she is doing *is* important. After all, the word Luke uses to describe Martha's many tasks is *diakonia*. She is distracted by her *diakonia*. *Diakonia*, the same word from which we get the title deacon. *Diakonia*, the word Luke uses in the Book of Acts to describe the ministry of Jesus's disciples-turned-apostles as they spread the gospel. Martha is consumed by her *diakonia*, her ministry – this work of hosting Jesus is ministry.

But the problem is that Martha can't stop doing – she can't pause her ministry long enough to enjoy the company of her guest. Instead she is hyper-fixated on making everything right, to the point of calling out her own sister to a guest – calling her out not to any old person, but to the Lord himself. I mean, I guess if anyone can fix our problems, it's Jesus, right? But Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead he invites Martha to put down everything she is worrying over, leave everything that is distracting her from being here in the moment with him – Jesus invites Martha to stop what she's doing and to simply be. To sit in the presence of her honored guest – to sit in his presence and listen to him, like her sister Mary is doing. It's not that Mary shouldn't help Martha, it's not that the work Martha is doing is not important – it's just that she has Jesus in her house, and she is missing it.

Of course we want everything to be nice when our guests come over. Of course we want to pay attention to their needs and work hard to meet those needs in a gracious and hospitable way. But having everything perfectly prepared is not the point of having guests. The point of having guests is to be present in the moment with those guests. In the moment of presence: that is where the sacred connection between human beings happens, the sacred connection that allows us to reap the benefits of

deeper relationships and happier lives. You might call it messy hospitality, hospitality that focuses on connection rather than perfection. Not perfect – present.

In her recent book *Good Things*, cook and food media personality Samin Nosrat talks about how for years she longed to start a tradition of weekly dinner with friends, one that would bring people together for good food and good conversation, the opportunity to really connect with one another. The desire was there, but she struggled to make it happen. She always felt too busy traveling for work, too unsettled in her life to turn her dream into a reality. She writes, "I made many excuses for it over the years, but the one I relied on most was this: my apartment was too small for a proper dining table. Where would people sit? How could I host a weekly dinner without a table? On one level, I knew this was irrational. I've always encouraged others to think more expansively about space and let go of convention. Sit on the floor, I declare. Sit on the couch. Eat at the coffee table. And yet, I couldn't do it myself," she says.[3]

Finally, Samin bought a house and commissioned a local woodworker to build her a table. And then one week after it arrived, the pandemic shut down the world. Foiled again. One morning a year and a half later, Samin was struggling with a recipe for braised pork when she got a text from a casual friend – Sarah and her kids were at the nearby farmer's market and wondered if they could stop by to pet Samin's dog Fava. "Of course," she responded. "I'm just here ruining some pork." She continues, "While the kids played with Fava in the yard, Sarah asked what was wrong. I don't know, I said, I just can't get this braise right. It's haunting me. And to make matters worse, I'll be stuck with six pounds of braised pork to eat by myself. 'Well, we'll help you eat it,' Sarah offered with a coy smile."

Samin reflects, "Maybe it's because I was feeling so low at the time or so deprived of casual gatherings that didn't require complicated arrangements and COVID tests. But I was so lonely and starved for connection that I received Sarah's casual offer like a vial of life-saving elixir. When? I quickly asked, worried that she might recant. How about Tuesday at our house, Sarah proposed. Two days later, I arrived at her door, pork in hand. We shredded it into a dinner of tacos for which everyone was grateful. No one as much as me," Samin says. She continues, "The braise may not have been a major culinary achievement, but it did just fine for dinner on a Tuesday night in Oakland. It was so natural and nice to be together that as the evening ended, we all wondered, should we do it again next Tuesday?" Samin, Sarah's family and some other friends have continued weekly dinners ever since, though Monday became their regular day.

Four years after the first of these accidentally weekly dinners, Samin wrote: "It took nearly eight months of Monday dinners for me to realize I'd inadvertently built the ritual I'd so craved. I've finally found the sense of meaning in cooking and in life that I've sought for so long. It brings me indescribable joy to share food with my Monday dinner family." Whether it's a fully home-cooked meal featuring the seasonal ingredient of the moment, or it's hot dogs and popsicles by the kiddie pool, Samin says that "*what* we eat together matters far less than the fact *that* we eat together."

Whether we are welcoming casual friends or Jesus himself, perfection is not the point – presence is. The connections that make life meaningful happen not when we have everything put together, but when we turn toward each other, when we give each other our full attention. So next time you're tempted to zone out on your phone at 7:45 on a Wednesday night, maybe send a quick text inviting a friend over for tacos instead. You never know – by the mysterious workings of grace, what starts as a messed-up pork braise might become a life-giving weekly ritual. And as we welcome one another, may we offer each other the kind of hospitality that values presence over perfection, that brings deeper relationships and happier lives – the same kind of hospitality our loving God offers to us.

1. "When Wedge Salad Becomes a Wedge Issue," *The Sporkful*, October 19, 2026. https://www.sporkful.com/when-wedge-salad-becomes-a-wedge-issue-with-gail-simmons-ayesha-nurdjaja/
2. "You Are No Longer Invited to Dinner," by Derek Thompson on his Substack newsletter, September 29, 2026. https://www.derekthompson.org/p/the-death-of-the-american-host?r=1vpou&utm_medium=ios&triedRedirect=true
3. Samin Nosrat, *Good Things: Recipes and Rituals to Share with People You Love*, Random House, 2025.