

Proper 11, Year C

- If there's one word that every church, in pretty much every last denomination, wants to use to describe itself, it's the word "welcoming"
- We talk a lot in the church about welcoming newcomers, or being a welcoming community, and rightly so
- After all, it's right here in the Bible
- Welcoming may not be the only theme for our readings this morning, but it is one that unites this OT reading from Genesis and the story we hear of Mary and Martha from Luke's Gospel
- Both are famous stories – for different reasons
- This story of Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, and these three mysterious men is a story that everyone knows, if not upon hearing, at least on sight
- One of the most famous icons in the world, likely the most famous Russian icon – by the most famous Russian iconographer – of all time, is of this Genesis passage
- In it, three angels are seated around a table, with a lone oak in the background, and Abraham nowhere in sight
- And it's probably the most famous icon of the trinity – we're told, after all, that the Lord appeared to Abraham by those oaks, just before these three men are introduced
- So it is, we're to assume, the Lord in the form of these three men whom Abraham invites to be served and be fed – these men whom Abraham extends his welcome, his hospitality, to
- Whether Abraham knew or not isn't in the text, so it's possible to read it either way – either knowing exactly who these three persons were, Abraham welcomed the Lord – or he did so even without knowing – but either way, he was blessed for his hospitality
- If you read it as though Abraham only eventually recognized the Lord, it reminds me a bit of the story in Luke's Gospel of the disciples on the road to Emmaus – when they walk on the road with Jesus, their resurrected Lord, but don't recognize him – and only at the end of their days' journey, when they invite Christ in to dine with them, and they break bread together, do they know who it is that they've welcomed into their midst
- Only then do they recognize that their Lord and their God has risen from the dead, conquering death once and for all
- The story we heard from Luke this morning comes a ways before that, of course – but it's also an extremely familiar passage, and also one with multiple interpretations

- We've all likely heard a sermon or two pitting Mary against Martha – talking about the importance of contemplation compared to action – or decrying the need to always be busy – or any number of other themes we tend to read in this passage
- But I haven't often heard the idea of welcome emphasized in this story, and I think that's something of a shame
- How many of us would be willing to consider our duties as a host fulfilled if we didn't spend any time with our guests? If we were too busy with our own lives, our own tasks, our own to-do lists, to actually sit and visit with them, enjoy their company?
- How many of us would consider ourselves welcome somewhere if we were invited there by a friend who then disappeared so they could catch up on some work they needed to get done?
- It sounds sort of ridiculous when we put it in those terms, but I've seen that more often than you'd think
- Seminarians tend to spend their first year visiting churches near the seminary to try to find a place that might work as a field education site, a place to do some on the job training in the second and third years of seminary – and one of the most surprising things about doing that is just how many churches you go in where no one says a word to you
- Many of you have probably had a similar – and similarly unsettling – experience
- (It can cause a truly existential crisis – if I go to a church and there, in the house of God, surrounded by members of the Body of Christ, I'm not even recognized or acknowledged, what does that say about my status as a member of the Body? What does that say about my importance to God?)
- I try not to get too angry about it, or to hold it against the people involved – because the truth is, it's probably any number of things – they might be preoccupied because of something going on in their lives, or they're excited to see a friend they haven't seen in ages, or they're somewhat new themselves and don't know if I'm new or if they just haven't seen me before yet and don't want to be rude by asking
- I can imagine these as possible reasons because I know them well – I'm sure they've prevented me from welcoming others on occasion
- But it's impossible for me to say what else they have going on – the only thing I have to go on is whether they welcomed me – like Abraham and Mary did the Lord – or whether they went on about their business, like Martha
- Ultimately, when it comes to being welcoming – our intentions, however noble, don't

actually matter

- What matters is how we welcome others who find themselves here in the midst of our community
- Which is why you've hopefully heard (and will continue to hear) about a new ministry we're beginning here at Grace called Invite Welcome Connect
- And it is exactly what it sounds like, although perhaps there's a little bit more to it behind the scenes than that
- It's about the importance of hospitality, of being welcoming – that ideal we're all striving toward, that idea grounded in our theology as far back as Abraham and as central as the way we receive Jesus Christ
- It's about daring to invite others to take part in the life of our community, about being more intentional in the way that we welcome them once they're here, and about how we connect them to the life of this community so that they truly become a part of it, and enrich it, rather than simply being permitted to dwell on the periphery
- We've already started a couple of practices that should help us to be even more welcoming than Grace already is
- For example, (if you go to/here at) our 9:30 service you might notice that we now have Greeters, whose ministry is to identify people who haven't been to Grace before and to make sure that they feel at home and welcome here
- Invite Welcome Connect is an important ministry, and one that we're hopeful will change the shape of this parish – not drastically, or to the point where it's unrecognizable – but turn it a little bit more outward
- And, if we're honest, there's some vulnerability in being welcoming, in being hospitable, that we don't always want to admit
- Because to truly welcome someone is more than just an invitation to assimilate
- It isn't Abraham telling the three men to just be there with him in what he was doing before – and it isn't Martha continuing to go on about her business
- Welcoming other people means that we don't always get to set the terms or the agenda of our engagement – that we won't necessarily be able to keep doing things the exact same way that we've always done them – which for us Episcopalians can be a bit of a scary thing
- But I hope that we can dare greatly together – I hope that together we'll be willing to see who comes in our doors, and even to take a deeper look at who it is that's already here, and see how it is that this community can be enriched by them – how we can do a better

job of making everyone feel truly welcome, truly part of this community of Grace