

November 19, 2023
Room Enough: The Heart of Hospitality
Luke 10:38-42; 1 Corinthians 13
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Jesus Visits Martha and Mary

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."

Last week, we began a short series looking at **Hospitality**. It seems particularly relevant with Thanksgiving and Christmas quickly approaching. We've started to see the master chefs making the rounds of the morning TV shows showing us how to set the perfect table, prepare the perfect turkey with all the sides, all while seeming so effortless. But, this isn't the kind of hospitality that we are talking about. =We aren't talking about Martha Stewart. But, instead, we're talking about Jesus' hospitality. Last week, Pastor Nikki helped us to consider the "DNA" of Christian hospitality.

Pop quiz- does anyone remember what the DNA stands for?

D= Deliberate (or Done intentionally)

N= Nurtures Relationships

A= Authentic

So, Christian hospitality is intentional, it focuses on relationship building, and isn't contrived or made up, but is authentic to who we are and who we are called to be. It asks the questions, "Did I see Christ in them?" and "Did they see Christ in me?"

Christian hospitality seems like it should be so easy, but it is hard. It's hard to be intentional, to nurture relationships, and authenticity is terrifying to many of us. It's a lot easier to guard our hearts and minds than to let others know exactly how vulnerable we might be. If Christian hospitality is not done with the right heart, out of a heart that recognizes our need of Christ and Christ's work in our lives, we can become resentful and frustrated, worn out from all of the doing, and we miss out on the gifts that come from embracing others, being filled from the relationships with others who carry God's image in their hearts and lives.

As 1 Corinthians 13 puts it,

13 If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

2 If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.

3-7 If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

These words from The Message translation remind us that we can do all kinds of good deeds, but if not done in love, we are a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal, a nagging brother or sister...

Take Martha, for instance. In our gospel reading today, Jesus is traveling with his disciples toward Jerusalem, and He stops in a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. As the story goes on, we learn that Martha has a sister named Mary who sits at Jesus' feet. Martha, meanwhile, takes on all of the traditional tasks of hospitality. I imagine her rushing around to make sure that there's enough food- and what kind of food would you serve to the Messiah? Certainly, your best, right? Is there enough plates for everyone? How about the wine? Is there a place for them to wash their feet? I can just imagine how much was on Martha's mind and see her rushing here and there, continually glancing at her sister who "should" be helping her to get ready to serve all of these people. Why is she just sitting there- at the feet of Jesus, like one of the men? Doesn't she understand that the Messiah has come to their house and there's so much that needs to be done?! The NRSV translates it as "Martha was distracted by her many tasks." The word translated as "distracted" here has the connotation of being pulled or dragged in many directions. She was so overwhelmed that she finally couldn't take it anymore and went to Jesus saying, "Don't you care that I'm slaving away here? Tell my sister to help me!" Translated—I'm so tired, tell my lazy sister to get off her duff and help me!

I feel a lot of empathy with Martha, here, and I'm guessing that I'm not alone, especially as we are preparing for Thanksgiving. Like many of you, I will be hosting Thanksgiving this week for my family. My

parents, siblings, and kids will be at my house, and I've started the lists- anyone else out there have a list or 2 or 10 going? The house needs cleaned—A friend of mine once had a picture that hung in her house that said, “this house cleaned under threat of company.” Yeah- that's me. Then, there's the shopping that needs to be done, the dishes prepared. I have to admit that I can turn into a bit of a cranky crab when it comes time for everyone to get there. There's so much that has to be done that I have ended up yelling at my kids once or twice to get up off of their rumps and to help me! So, Martha, I hear you!

Martha is the practical one. She's all about caring for the needs of Jesus and His followers- after all, she threw the doors of her home open and welcomed them in. But something has happened in the midst of her serving and caring, she has become resentful and angry. (Again, Martha, I hear you!) And, when she goes to Jesus, He looks at her and shakes His head, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Now, since Jesus finished telling the story of the Good Samaritan just before this part of the gospel, we can assume that Jesus wasn't admonishing Martha for caring for the needs of others, because that's what we are called to do.

But, perhaps, just perhaps, Martha lost sight of the heart of hospitality? She was so busy with all of her distractions that she was missing out on the relationships that were possible. And, it left her frustrated, angry, and not very loving. Jesus was right there in her home, and she was missing out! She forgot about the N in the DNA- Nurturing of relationships.

And Jesus says to Martha, it's not all about the work, it's about the heart. As Pastor Nikki talked about last week, making room for others means giving them a place to encounter Jesus and to be changed. To do this, we have to throw open the doors, not only of our homes and our church, but our hearts, as well. And we can't get so dragged down in the “doing” of things that we neglect the being, the heart of hospitality. That comes when willing to give of ourselves, recognize that hospitality is actually a 2-way street, and we need to listen to one another, to genuinely hear what the “other” needs, not just assume that we know what they need.

Martha's distraction and worry leave no room for the most important aspect of hospitality — gracious attention to the guest. In fact, she breaks all the rules of hospitality by trying to embarrass her sister in front of her guest, and by asking her guest to intervene in a family dispute. She even goes so far as to accuse Jesus of not caring about her (Lord, do you not care...?).

Martha's worry and distraction prevent her from being truly present with Jesus, and cause her to drive a wedge between her sister and herself, and between Jesus and herself. She has missed out on the “one thing needed” for true hospitality. There is no greater hospitality than listening to your guest (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-3/commentary-on-luke-1038-42-3>).

Our District Superintendent, Dr. Tim Bias, preached at our Special session of conference a few weeks ago and shared a story from his time in parish ministry. I will inevitably get many of the details wrong- so please forgive me, but his main point was so captivatingly honest that I wanted to share his story as an example today.

Dr. Bias served as the pastor at First UMC in Des Moines, Iowa. They were a church much like ours that sat in the midst of a busy downtown. They had a significant homeless population that surrounded the church, and they offered meals to many of the folks throughout the week (Sound familiar?).

Dr. Bias shared that one day one of the men, we'll call him John, who often slept in the dumpster behind the church came into the church and asked to see Dr. Bias. Now, Tim knew John well and when he came down to meet him, he said, "John how are you doing, can I get you something to eat?" John said that he wasn't hungry and just wanted to talk, but Dr. Bias pushed, "come on, now, it's alright. You must be hungry." "Let's go to the local café to get something to eat."

"Alright," said John. "Then, can we talk?"

"Sure," said Dr. Bias. "My car is right outside."

So, the two went to the local café where they sat with one another. Dr. Bias told John to order anything that was on the menu because he was buying. But, John said that he wasn't hungry.

Dr. Bias said, "Come on, it's ok. Get what you want."

John said, "Fine" and ordered something.

When the food came, John never really touched his food, he simply looked at Dr. Bias and asked, "now can we talk?"

You see, he was getting ready to report to jail and he wanted to ask Dr. Bias if Jesus really loved him, really could forgive him. And, together in that café, they prayed together.

Dr. Bias said that he never forgot the lesson that John taught him—to never assume that he knew what the other person needed, never assume that you know better than they do.

All that time, John simply wanted to talk, to be seen and heard and to know that Jesus saw him, heard him, loved him. Yet, Dr. Bias had missed all the signals.

In his book, "Reaching Out," Henri Nouwen writes, "listening is an art that must be developed, not a technique that can be applied as a monkey wrench to nuts and bolts. It needs the full and real presence of people to each other. It is indeed one of the highest forms of hospitality." (p. 95)

To capture the heart of hospitality, we, like Mary must cultivate the art of listening to the moving of the Spirit and to be fully present with one another. We need to recognize that hospitality actually goes both ways. It isn't about us filling the needs of another, or someone else filling our needs, but it is about opening our hearts and recognizing our own need and the gifts that others bring to the relationship. (Pohl, Making Room: Recovering Hospitality, p 72).

As Pohl writes, there's a transformation that occurs in us when we recognize, "I'm not here because I'm helping them. I'm here because we're helping each other." Do you hear the difference that happens there? It's not all about me- the stuff that I can do for them, but about walking the path together, recognizing our mutual humanness and need. Seeing, truly seeing, the other and the gifts that they have to offer.

I think that was the better part that Mary chose in today's gospel reading. She chose to sit at Christ's feet, to join other disciples, to be in relationship.

This is the hard work of hospitality, of being a disciple—it's hard to see God in those who are different from us. It's hard to humble ourselves, to become vulnerable, and to admit that we all have a common humanity- a common need- and we just might not have all the answers.

This is what Christ did for us- He emptied Himself for us. As Philippians 2:6-8 says, God came to us in Christ who “did not cling to His equality with God, but emptied Himself... and became as people are; and being as all people are, He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.”.

Jesus emptied Himself for us, and we must empty ourselves for others, for Jesus told us “As I have loved you, so you should love one another.”

Henri Nouwen, in his book, *Reaching Out*, puts it this way. Hospitality means a poverty of mind and heart.

By this, Nouwen means that we must be willing to recognize that no one can fully grasp the mysteries of life. It's understanding that we can't know it all and that others may see things differently, shining a new light on all the things about God that we thought that we knew (104).

We also need a Poverty of the Heart, an openness to understand that “God is not only greater than our mind, he is also greater than our heart, and just as we have to avoid the temptation of adapting God to our small concepts, we also have to avoid adapting Him to our small feelings” (Nouwen p.106).

“With poverty of the heart, we can receive the experiences of others as a gift to us. Their histories can creatively connect with ours, their lives give new meaning to ours” (107)

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who seemed to know everything? When I visited Israel in 2021, one of the activities that we could do was have dinner with a Palestinian Christian family that was living in Bethlehem. My friend was going, so I figured, “Why not?!” I didn't even realize that there were Palestinian Christians. So, we were welcomed into this family home where 3 generations lived together. We shared a meal with one another and then gathered in their living room to talk. While there, Marianne, one of the other guests dominated the conversation, telling the host family all of her opinions, her travels, her life, yet giving the family little room to share their experiences, which was really what we were there for- to learn from them and to hear about their experiences. It truly felt like there was no room for anyone else in that room, in that conversation.

When we were finally able to hear from our host family, we learned how proud they felt in living where Jesus lived and was born, and about how the priest at the catholic church spoke 11 different languages to be able to speak to all of those in his parish. 11 languages! I couldn't imagine, but there, even the teenager in the house spoke 3 languages. They understood far better than we did the importance of being able to speak with another and to truly understand them.

They opened our eyes and stretched my heart to better conceive of a God who was big enough to span the world, to speak in different languages, to defy my small ideas and understandings. I had to wonder, “how many times do I try to control a conversation when all I should be doing is listening and honoring the personhood and experiences of the other. How can I learn to speak in another's language so that I could hear, truly hear their stories and their needs?

It takes a poverty of mind and heart to do that, a willingness to empty yourself to hear, and I mean truly hear, the perspectives of others, a willingness to admit that we don't have all of the answers and that others can offer us so much. It is discovering a way to be the way without getting in the way (Nouwen 108).

This is what transforms our hospitality—when we realize that it is about giving of ourselves, but it is also about receiving what others have to offer. If we get so distracted by the doing that we are pulled in too many directions, we miss out on the joy of relationship, of the gifts that others have to offer to us. We miss out on the opportunity to love and to be fully loved.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends.

Love is at the root of Christian hospitality. Only when we empty ourselves to welcome Christ into our lives, when we admit that we don't know all the answers, when we listen, truly listen to others, only then do we deeply welcome one another and share together in the love of God. When we grow in relationship with one another, watching for those who are missing from the table, not only giving but also allowing ourselves to receive, only then do we pour out the love of God onto others and open ourselves to receive that same love and grace in our lives. It is a 2-way street where we acknowledge that when we are in authentic relationship, we help one another, we care for one another, we grow together. We truly answer the questions, "Did I see Christ in them?" and "Did they see Christ in me?"

Holding this heart of hospitality, the heart of love which seeks to see Christ in others and to allow them to see Christ who dwells in us— This is our challenge (perhaps as we gather with family this week), it is our calling (whether we are in the kitchen or in line at the grocery store- at work or at school), and it is our blessing always and everywhere. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Blessing:

May you go now, with hearts open to welcome Christ in your family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers. May you empty yourselves to be filled with the love of Christ and to share that love with grace until at last we see Christ face to face Go now, with the heart of hospitality. May you trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, and love extravagantly. **Amen.**