

“A Place of Belonging and Caring”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Luke 10: 38-42 and 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8

Our Gospel lesson this morning starts out with the phrase, “Martha welcomed [Jesus] into her home.” This matters to me a great deal, because I think that while Jesus is completely correct that Martha was focusing on the wrong things, it is still the case that she was the one who invited him into her home. This was not without risk to her, or to her family. Meanwhile, she was about the tasks of caring for him while he was in her space. She fed him, gave him a beverage, and many other things customary for her day when someone visited. Mary, meanwhile, seemed to just sit there and talk with Jesus. Maybe it was Martha’s role to do all the tasks, but geez, it seems Mary could have helped a little! Doesn’t it?

You know I love the work of Fr. Richard Rohr. He always makes me think of things in different ways, and today is no exception. While it’s true that Martha completed many of the tasks of caring, she forgot one thing...and it wasn’t just sitting at Jesus’ feet...or was it? Let’s explore.

Fr. Rohr paraphrases Jesus' words (Luke 10:42) to Martha this way, "Martha, Martha, you worry about 'ten thousand things.' So few are necessary. Indeed, only one.

Rohr continues, "These well-known words come from Jesus to his dear friend, Martha. He is the house-guest of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Martha is doing the reasonable, hospitable thing – rushing around, fixing, preparing, and as the text brilliantly says, 'distracted with all the serving.' Yeah, we knew that.

Here is where it gets interesting. "Martha was everything good and right, but one thing she was not. She was not *present* most likely, not present to herself, her own feelings of resentment, perhaps her own martyr complex, her need to be needed." Been there. Have you? Think about when you have hosted a guest. Have you been so busy taking care of their "needs" that you completely missed their presence, and they never got a chance to see you? This is important to think about, but especially with the holidays coming up. I know that at one time, I was so focused on the perfect meal (served all at exactly the same time some years), waiting, ensuring a clean bathroom, and bedrooms, and a host of other things, so much so that no one saw me except at the meal itself. By that time, there are

too many things all happening at once for there to be deep, real conversation. I was there, but not present. I'd like to think I've gotten better about that.

Same thing happens when people come to church. I'm all over rolling out the red carpet to new people. I am not always cognizant of whether or not I'm present to our guests. Again, I'm there, but not necessarily present. I have a meeting. Someone needs something. I have a "to do" list in my head. All those are necessary, but sometimes, I also forget the "one thing."

Consider whether or not people want a perfect meal in a perfect house, with perfect service, if they never get to see the people they traveled to see. Jesus had traveled to see people who were very dear to him, and poor Martha, being good, might have missed his visit. I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, but has there been a time in your past where you were Martha? Were you upset afterwards, maybe not even knowing why, or just commenting, "Gee, I never got to talk with our guests."

If you recall, most of Jesus' ministry was a ministry of presence. People desire our presence. Whether you are the guest or the host, your presence is requested. Rohr continues, "Martha could not be present to her guests in any healing way, and spiritually speaking, she could not even be present to God.

Presence is of one piece. How you are present to anything is how you can be present to everything.” In our hustle and bustle culture, it’s difficult to be present as we run hither and yon. One good thing of the pandemic was that life slowed for many to the point that they began to realize what they had been missing. I wonder if we’ll forget that learning?

“So much of religion involves teaching people this and that, an accumulation of facts and imperatives that is somehow supposed to add up to salvation,” Father Rohr maintains, “[However], the great wisdom teachers know that one major change is needed: *how we do the moment*. Then all the this-and-that’s will fall into line. This is so important that Jesus was willing to challenge and upset his hostess and make us of a teachable moment.”

Now flip over to 1 Thessalonians. There is much in this passage, but look at how it ends: So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. (Repeat). Paul and his compatriots believed that it was just as important as sharing the Gospel to share their own selves. Believe it or not, that is what people most want to experience. You, me, our whole selves.

Yes, there is a lot to caring. And I thought about exploring the many ways we care about and for one another. I just finished a book by a good friend this week called *The Widows Way: A Journey Home*, by Callie Cochran-Hager. I knew much of the story of the passing of her husband not long before I left New London, but what I most learned is how hurtful many “well-meaning” people had been. They all seemed to think they needed to say the right thing, or to do the right thing all the time. My friend indicates throughout the book, in words that are hers, that she most wanted people’s presence. Sure, she most wanted her husband’s presence, as he died way too quickly and way too young. But from other people: a simple text, time for coffee, a phone call. Even a short catch up on what is happening in other’s lives. Listening to her story means the world to her both now and when her husband first passed. It hurt deeply when those things did not occur.

I interpret what she’s saying as the same thing Jesus said, and the same thing Richard identified. Our *presence* is requested. Not the gifts, or the elaborate meals, or the perfect words, but our *presence*. We are in the midst of considering what belonging means in this sermon series. In particular, today, what it means to care. There are many things we can “do” to care. But maybe

far more important than the casserole – as good as it is, Martha (!) -- is the time we spend fully present for those for whom we care.

From a church perspective, most churches concentrate on the gimmicks to welcome new people: the care package, the letter from the pastor, the “team” visit. There are volumes of instructions on how to visit someone properly when they first come to church. Even what you should make, and what you shouldn’t.

Meanwhile, when the person is at church, people greet them, but are not present among them. This isn’t about asking a hundred questions, but being present to their needs, their hopes, their needs, and their life story. What if we just said, “Hi, I’m Martha. Do you have everything you need? And if so, I’d love to get to know you more. Would you be willing to share with me?” I believe if churches get that right, we’ll be well on the way to welcoming new people. People don’t really care at all if we ever bring them a mug, or a loaf of bread, or one more church propaganda piece. If are present with them, sharing ourselves with them, and hearing from them, then they’ll know they are welcome here.

Caring is presence. Sometimes we’re so busy doing, we just plain forget that. Thanks, Martha (and Jesus), for the much-needed reminder. Will you share

with me again our Call to Worship from this morning? I think there is so much there, that we ought to say it again. Hopefully we can feel it as well.

It is not by chance that you arrived here today.
You have been looking for something larger than yourself.
Inside of you there is a yearning, a calling, a hope for more,
A desire for a place of belonging and caring.

Through your struggles, someone nurtured you into being,
Instilling a belief in a shared purpose, a common yet precious resource
That belongs to all of us when we share.

And so, you began seeking a beloved community:

A people that does not put fences around love.
A community that holds its arms open to possibilities of love.
A heart-home to nourish your soul and share your gifts.

Welcome home; welcome to worship.

May we all feel as if we have come home. Fully surrounded by the presence of God, and the presence of loving community.

In the many blessed names of a living, loving, always present God. Amen.