

Open Door Policy
A Sermon by the Rev. Mary Marple Thies
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – July 17, 2022

Please Read:
Genesis 18:1-10a
Psalm 15
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

There was a young man named Wladyslaw Krzysztofowicz—please forgive my pronunciation of his name as I am not certain how pronounce a first name bristling with consonants and a surname with three Z’s. This young man was Armenian and, during World War II, he lived in an area, which was overrun by the Nazis. They killed some of his family members. Then came the Soviet liberators, who killed some of the survivors. Wladyslaw escaped by swimming across the Danube River from Romania to Yugoslavia, then on to France and, finally, to America. He was able to make that last move because a Presbyterian Church in Portland, Oregon, sponsored him, even though he was Catholic, spoke no English and came from a Communist country. This young man learned English, Americanized his name, went to college, became a university professor, married and had a son, whose name you might recognize, Nicholas Kristof, a former columnist for *The New York Times*.¹

The Portland church that sponsored Wladyslaw paid for his transportation to America, covered his expenses once he arrived, and found him a job as a logger, which didn’t require him to speak English. They generously and graciously helped him to start a new life. It is a story of hospitality. Like Abraham, they welcomed a stranger and, while, they may not have discovered that they had unknowingly welcomed an angel, the stranger turned out to be an asset to our country.

We know about hospitality. We, too, have welcomed strangers. When the Abo Noktah family arrived from Syria, we, together with the First Presbyterian Church of Stamford, found an apartment and furnished it with everything from toothbrushes to bunk beds, filled the refrigerator, registered the children for school, drove the parents to English classes, found a job for the dad, and taught him how to drive. It took a lot of people putting in many hours, not just in those first months, but for years. That huge investment of time, money and hard work has paid off. The family has received their citizenships, their oldest daughter will be heading off to college in the fall, the two sons are doing well in school and working summer jobs, and the two younger daughters bubble over with laughter and delight.

That would not have been possible without all the Martha’s who practiced the hard and detailed work of hospitality. It is the Martha’s of this world who put in the hours and the effort to make things happen. They are the ones who carry out the practical side of loving the neighbor. So why does Jesus reprimand Martha in the little story we just heard? Jesus has just finished giving an example of neighborliness with the story of the good Samaritan who helped the wounded man, while the religious folks are shown as failing to show hospitality to the neighbor in need. Now Jesus seems to contradict himself, giving Mary the thumbs up for sitting passively at his feet and not helping with the dinner preparations. Isn’t it Martha who is demonstrating love of neighbor?

I confess this story has always bothered me because I see myself in Martha. I am a more of doer than a meditator. I may not as bad as one woman I heard of, who always sat sideways in her chair during meals, poised and ready for action, one foot stretched out toward the kitchen, unable to relax enough to enjoy the food and conversation, but I do always claim the chair at the table closest to

the kitchen. When Jesus reproved Martha, I hear that reproof as my own. Perhaps some of you are Martha's, too, and maybe, like me, you are wondering if there is any good news here for us.

Why does Jesus praise Mary and defend her against Martha? Some people have said that Jesus is not criticizing Martha's intent to be hospitable, but is criticizing her busy work, her preoccupation with all the trivial details of a fancy meal. She is the religious person who spends her time going to committee meetings, running the stewardship campaign or stocking the Sunday school rooms with crayons and scissors. She is one whom the "spiritual but not religious" crowd points to as why they choose to stay away from church. They would rather stay on their own, practicing meditation, than get involved in the minutiae of supporting the institution. But our faith has never been an abstract, disembodied, private spiritualized thing. All we have to do is look at Jesus himself to see that God got involved in the nitty-gritty of life. Jesus himself washed feet, fed crowds, touched the sick, held the children and taught their parents. God chose to send an embodied love letter to us, one that suffered and died and rose again. Jesus himself said that we would find and serve him in giving water to the thirsty, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked. Martha's are needed to make such things happen.

So what is the problem? Martha sounds like she is worn down and worn out by her work. She has gotten so dragged down by preparations—distracted, Jesus observes—that she has forgotten why. Martha can no longer remember why she invited Jesus to her home. Maybe she was hoping for recognition or trying to win favor or even to earn Jesus' love, but she has defeated her own purpose. All the joy and generosity of giving is lost in her annoyance and anxiety. She's no longer available for relationship with Jesus, or with her sister Mary. In a classic example of triangulation, she can only try to control and manipulate them. She has become exhausted and beaten down, and she lashes out. That is the problem; that is why Jesus praises Mary and defends her against Martha. She has allowed her hospitality work to get in the way of being hospitable, of giving gracious attention to her guest, of listening to him, and trusting the word he is proclaiming.

The Presbyterian Church of the Mountain is located on the Appalachian Trail. Some years ago the church discerned that God was calling them to a ministry of hospitality to the hikers on that trail. So they created a hostel in the church basement where hikers can shower, sleep and hang out. Church members clean the center, wash linens, prepare meals, drive injured hikers to the emergency room or to buy supplies. They do the Martha work, but they also do the Mary work. One night a week the entire congregation gathers with their guests for dinner and to get to know those visitors. They listen carefully to the hikers who tell their stories, stories of old men grieving the loss of loved ones, of young people delaying the responsibilities of adulthood, of wounded warriors trying to walk off traumatic stress, of those trying to heal from addictions.ⁱⁱ In the listening, they have found that they often witness God's grace at work in the lives of the hikers and in their own.

The story of Mary and Martha shows us that love of God and love of neighbor cannot be neatly separated. They are intertwined. We show love of God by loving neighbor and love of neighbor grows out of love of God. Preparing the meal, putting out the hymnals, serving the coffee, hammering the nails—these are acts of love, good, necessary, important acts. The problem is when those acts serve to distract us from Jesus, when we fail to take the time to listen to the Word, when we are pulled away from the vision of why we are doing what we are doing, when we are dragged away from the Kingdom by the busyness of Kingdom work.

What Jesus is reminding us— the Martha’s and Mary’s alike—is that God is in the world healing and feeding and restoring and that while what we do for others is vital, we can also trust God and hope for God’s New Creation. We don’t have to change the world all on our own. We can hold onto that vision of what God is doing and allow ourselves to rest our lives in God’s life. This story is not about siding with Martha or Mary, but living into that New Creation through both prayer and service.

Periodically, Scott prepares a worship planning list for the staff, with scriptures for each Sunday, special holidays and so forth. For this Sunday, he included the note that this is National Ice Cream Day. So I want to end with an ice cream story.

A church I know used to kick off the new program year with the congregation going to a camp for an afternoon of swimming and canoeing followed by a potluck picnic dinner and vespers around a campfire. Every year a member would bring an ice cream freezer. People would chop up strawberries or chocolate bars to add to the cream and eggs and sugar. Someone else would bring bags of ice and kosher salt. During the afternoon we would take turns cranking until the cream was thick and frozen. All of that was the Martha work, of course. But then came the Mary time, as the ice cream was shared and savored and the stories were told. One year a woman came who was dying of cancer. Her husband and young sons had wrestled her wheelchair into the car and then around the campground so she could join in the day. For much of the afternoon she sat near the ice cream freezer and those of us who cranked chatted with Bonnie. We listened as she spoke of the work she had had to give up, of her hopes for her children, of her joy at being able to be present that day. At vespers, we sang “Abide with Me.” You may recall the last verse, “I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless; Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness. Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, Thy victory? I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.” As Bonnie sang, her face aglow in spite of tears, and we all knew we were witnessing a deep and abiding faith. We were sitting at the feet of Christ.

ⁱ Nicholas Kristof, “Welcoming Wladyslaw Krzyztofowicz,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2018, p. A31.

ⁱⁱ Sherry Blackman, “Weary Walkers on Appalachian Trail Find a Respite,” *Presbyterians Today*.