

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: Luke 10:38-42

Title: “The Art of Neighboring: Overcoming Barriers”

I really enjoy working in my shop, but there are times when it turns from a clean, organized workspace--in which I know where everything is--to a disaster zone that is so cluttered and messy and disorganized that I don't want to set foot in it. Usually that happens after having moved from working on one project after another and failing to put things away after completing the first project and then moving on to another project and failing to put things away after that one and then moving on to another. You get the picture.

What happens though is that I get stuck in this place of not wanting to go there because it's such a mess but I also know I need to go there in order to clean it up so I can work again. I get stuck in the place of avoidance it because it just feels as if it's such a monumental task that I'll never get it done. It's as if I build a barrier between myself and the shop and I just stand there looking at it, not wanting to spend the energy I think it will take to get through the mess. I tell myself I don't have the time to get it done.

Thankfully, I'm married to someone who gets me. Last week she told me one night, “Let's just spend an hour cleaning up down there.” Reluctantly, I succumbed to her goading and within that hour we had the place cleaned up and organized again. It only took one person prodding another to get past the barrier I'd built in my own mind and get something done.

When it comes to neighboring, I wonder if we sometimes build these barriers in our own minds, walls that keep us from doing something, taking a first step toward getting to know someone who lives near us. I wonder if we get stuck in our routines or our fears in ways that keep us from living into Jesus' Great Commandment to love God with all we are and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. What would it take really to overcome the walls we build whether out of fear or routine? And what might happen to us and our relationships with those who live near us if we did overcome that which might be keeping us from loving our actual neighbors?

Jesus was a master at overcoming barriers. He did not allow the rules of his culture or his religion to overcome the more important matter of loving God and loving neighbor. In this story from Luke, Martha is being the hospitable hostess which is what was expected. I imagine their time together may have gone a little like this.

It was a relaxing time. Jesus had been walking the better part of the day. Not long

before, he had had conversation with a lawyer about neighbors. Today he was in the home of Martha and Mary, still making his way to Jerusalem and his destiny there.

He sat in a corner of Martha's small home. A table roughly hewn out of the orange brown acacia tree stood in the middle of the room. Handcrafted utensils were orderly placed on the table. Sunlight pierced through the windows of the stone walls, passing over the table, through the cracks on to the earthen floor making lines of light in the dirt. He sat on a wooden bench. Mary at his feet as he taught her.

Mary was taken in by his words. Like a teenager who finds an adult willing to listen and take them seriously, this moment was a special time for her. For one thing many rabbis of the day did not think equality among the sexes was something for which to strive. Gloria Steinham would not have been a welcome personality in the Temple. In fact, recorded rabbinical thought is very hard on women. "Ten qab [which equals about 11 1/2 quarts] of empty-headedness have come upon the world, nine having been received by women and one by the rest of the world." is found in rabbinical writing.

". . . May the words of the Torah be burned, they should not be handed over to women." is found in still another. Most probably this was not the attitude of all rabbis toward women, but there is little question that first century life was patriarchal and that women as a group were oppressed people

So it's little wonder that Mary sat at his feet listening as a student would at the feet of a rabbi. Nowhere else would she hear the things of God as Jesus shared them with her. The rabbis wouldn't teach her. But here she had the attention of the Master, a one-on-one moment, and she claimed it as the precious gift that it was. She knew the clothes needed washing. The bills needed to be paid. Yes, she was behind on her reports for work, and there was some stress around the need to get ready for her trip, but a moment like this couldn't be missed. Those other parts of her life, which needed tending to were good things, but this moment. . . , this was the best thing she could be doing. There was nothing better than being in the presence of One who touched her soul and offered a connection with God like no other offered.

Yet, this was a special time for Martha, too. The great teacher and healer was staying in her home. She'd heard the story of the Good Samaritan, how important caring hospitality was. She had heard about the rejection he and his disciples received in many of the Samaritan towns. For her, however, it was an honor to have him stay with her. Because she felt it an honor to have him stay, she was very much concerned about preparing an elaborate meal for him.

The smell of baking bread moved through the house as Martha prepared the meal, running back and forth between the kitchen and the table, tending to all the details necessary for the proper preparation of a meal for an honored dignitary. The house was getting warm with the heat of the oven, as it does so often at Thanksgiving time when the turkey is roasting all day and the house is full of people.

Martha had worked up a sweat, not only due to the heat, but also out of her anxiety. It wasn't simply empty anxiety she was experiencing. She was distressed because she cared deeply about this moment with Jesus. Like Mary, she understood the unique nature of this visit. Few men treated her and other women as he did. No men spoke to her of God's grace and love in ways that she felt God's presence in her innermost self. No rabbi would willingly do so for a woman. She understood his uniqueness and wanted to honor him with a gift she knew she could give: a wonderfully prepared dinner.

Martha was the kind of person who would be greatly concerned about world hunger. Her

heart would ache when she heard about children in Haiti who were malnourished and she could put her whole self into the cause of feeding them, wanting everything to be just right with the world. She was the kind of person who could work 80 hour weeks in order to give her family more than she ever had when she was a child. She was the kind of person who had a hard time sitting down, always up doing something whether it was cleaning, gardening, planning for the Boy Scout or Girl Scout activities in which her kids were involved. There was always something else to be done, and Martha being the dedicated, concerned, committed person she was just found it ran against her nature to just sit and listen. Too many things needed tending.

There were times--she had to admit to herself--when she felt as though she would never complete all the tasks. She would have appreciated the cartoon I used to have on my study wall. Calvin -- of Calvin and Hobbes fame -- is standing there, looking distressed and he says: "God put me on earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now I am so far behind I will never die." Martha could identify with that. There were times that she was so busy that she felt out of control, as if the tasks that needed attention were controlling her.

Can you relate? When it comes to neighboring one of the barriers for many of us is a perceived lack of time. We have too much to do, too much to accomplish. Our schedules are just too full to add another thing like making a commitment to getting to know our neighbors. How can God expect me to love my actual neighbor when I have so much crowding my calendar already?

Take a look at this video clip of one neighbor who wrestled with this issue of time.

(Show video)

When it comes to this barrier of time, the book from which this series comes, says that there are three harmful lies at work in the lives of hurried and harried people. Do you hold them in your mind sometimes in order to get through your day? Here they are:

The first is that things will settle down someday. We might tell ourselves something like "If I can only get through next Wednesday, then things will settle down." But then next Wednesday comes and another deadline comes and the anxiety levels rise again. Something else occupies our attention and this happens repeatedly—one after another. Even retired people tell me that they are busier than they were when they were working. So things won't settle down until we die or until we adjust our schedules and clarify what is most important in our lives.

The second lie is that more will be enough. One more achievement, one more purchase, one more...something will bring contentment. But that, too, keeps us on a never-ending treadmill, chasing after an illusion.

The third lie is that everybody lives like this. We think being crazy busy all the time is the way everyone lives. It's a way of life. So living at a frantic pace is just the way it is in our culture.

In John's Gospel, Jesus offers a different way of living: "I have come", he said, "that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Having life to the full is not about having a full calendar or to feel so crazy busy that there is no time left to have conversations with other people or to spend time at the feet of the Master. Life to the full--or as Paul puts it in Timothy "Life that really is life"—is having a sense of abundance. It's about knowing and experiencing life as being meaningful and good as God has given it and meant it to be for us.

As Martha was preparing the meal, running to and fro, she saw Mary just sitting there listening to Jesus. They both looked relaxed and engaged in meaningful conversation, which made things worse from Martha's perspective. Here she was working so hard sweat rolled off her brow, while all Mary could do was sit there and listen to Jesus.

Martha didn't say anything for a while. But every time she passed them on her way from the kitchen to the table, she saw her: just sitting there. Every time she saw her, she became more angry. Martha's muscles tight now, eyes hard and full of anger, she could take this injustice no longer. With sure, quick steps she approached them both and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me!"

Jesus answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled over many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

John Ortberg is the pastor of Menlo Presbyterian Church and a popular Christian author. He coined the phrase "hurry sickness" as a description of one characteristic of our society and says further that "love and hurry are fundamentally incompatible. Love always takes time, and time is the one thing hurried people don't have." To love someone is to be willing to spend time with them, letting go—if we have to—of other things in order to spend time with them.

Mary was not driven by her own tasks, necessary and important though they might have been. Rather, she recognized the presence of God and took the time to listen, to spend time with Jesus. Her spirit was nurtured in those moments. Jesus had given her something that no amount of work could have provided her. Being anxious about it wouldn't have been helpful to her. She simply had to take the time to stop and listen, even against her sister's angry eyes, even against a culture that reinforced the expectation that she should have been in the kitchen, too.

Last Sunday I shared my block map with you and told you that as a result of this worship series and the small group study of the book, I felt challenged to meet neighbors I didn't know. Two of them live catty-corner across the street from us. I was in the garage working on something and I noticed them in their driveway getting ready to go for a bike ride. As usual, I thought to myself, "I need to get this done. I can always catch them another time." But then decided not to listen to that habitual voice of the task master and walked over and introduced myself to Ron and Janice Watt after apologizing for taking so long to do so. They've lived there a couple of years now.

Well, yesterday Ron was on our front porch with his bike helmet on his head telling me that he was concerned about the neighbor next to him. Looked like they left for the weekend and left their garage door open and forgot to close it. Did I know anything about it? I didn't but I did have their cell phone number and so I called and asked if they'd like us to close their door? Turns out they had forgotten to shut it and appreciated the call, so I went over later and closed

the door.

Just a simply thing. Nothing earth shattering or deeply life changing about that encounter, but I wonder if he would have come over and stood on our front porch if I had not felt compelled by the Spirit to go and simply get his name. Would he have felt comfortable approaching me about his neighbor if we had not met the week before? I don't think so.

I'd like to encourage and challenge you to continue filling out your own block map. Continue to work at getting the names of those neighbors you don't know. In a few weeks we'll be giving out refrigerator magnets of the block map for those who want to take on this challenge. I'd also like to encourage you if you live in a neighborhood area to spend some time in your front yard this week. Spend an hour in front of your house rather than behind it so you can see your neighbors and they can see you. Create opportunities to get to know them.

We hear this Martha/Mary story in the context of Jesus affirming a man who asks the question "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" If you were here last Sunday you may remember that Jesus asked the religious lawyer what answer he found in the scripture and also asked him how he interpreted what he read. The lawyer responded by saying "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and all your soul and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus told him "Do this and you will live." And then the man asks "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan and tells the lawyer, "Go and do likewise".

This week he tells Martha, a woman with type A personality, "Sit down and listen. Enjoy the presence of God." Being a disciple of the Christ is not either "Go and do likewise" or "Sit down like Mary and pay attention to that which matters most". It's both\and. When we are able to love God and love neighbor, really love them, we experience life in the fullest. We find "life that really is life". What a world this would be if we all experienced such life deep in our souls always and everywhere! That is my hope for you this morning, that such life will be yours now and always.