

“Mary & Martha” A sermon by Jeffrey Kramer  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
July 21, 2019, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
Luke 10: 38-42

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

I like beginning my talks with a quote from Henri Nouwen and the closing benediction from Saint Francis, because they call us to be attentive to how we live our response to Christ's call.

“In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.”

We are very familiar with this story of the two sisters, Martha and Mary; possibly too familiar.

We often see Martha as a complaining, harried housewife and Mary as the devoted disciple. Both women are engaged in different aspects of ministry, or ways of following Jesus and his teachings.

The scene is set at Martha's house; not Martha's husband, not Martha's father, not even her brother Lazarus' house. As we discussed a few weeks ago this sexual equality often is passed over.

It is too easy to view scripture from the perspective of our own time and setting. Martha is not entertaining in a split-level ranch style in the suburbs; it is more likely a compound with several small structures. Remember from two weeks ago Jesus was traveling with at least 70 disciples and there was always a crowd following him.

Martha may have been a bit overwhelmed. Or, she may have been upset with Mary for not following gender norms. Women's roles were well defined by their society and she did not belong with the men discussing the scriptures.

This is really a story illustrating the balance of faith and works; but that is not where I want us to go this morning. I want to look at Martha's extraordinary hospitality.

Last week Kevin told us about who is our neighbor and showing kindness. Two weeks ago, Lee told of the disciples sent into the neighboring villages taking nothing with them, relying on the hospitality of the local residence. God's economy is not based on scarcity and fear; God's economy is based on abundance, kindness, and hospitality.

The national dialogue this week has been about ‘who belongs.’ Throughout the world, people and governments, the rhetoric is about closing borders and building walls that separate us from them – the “other”. Our question this morning is “to whom do we give hospitality?”

Hospitality is easy when it involves our friends and most of the time our family. But when Jesus enters the picture, everything tends to be flipped upside down. Just like going the extra mile, turning the other cheek, offering more than the shirt off your back but also your coat. A little further in Luke Jesus says, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if

you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.” Jesus expands the cultural notion of hospitality so much so that we are expected to go overboard in practicing hospitality. In Romans 12: “Share with people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” The word translated as “practice” is often translated “pursue”. So what Paul is saying here is that hospitality is not an option. In many ways, it is a spiritual and a moral obligation.

The Bible affirms – strongly and unequivocally – the obligation to treat strangers with dignity and hospitality.

The Hebrew Bible, the words “gûr” and “gēr” refer to the “stranger,” though they are also translated as “newcomer” and “alien” or “resident alien,” respectively.

In the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the word “gēr”, “resident alien” appears almost 50 times, and the fifth book, Deuteronomy, delineates a number of specific provisions for treating “the stranger” not just with courtesy but also with active support and provision.

Deuteronomy sets out the requirement that a portion of produce be set aside by farmers every third year for strangers, widows and orphans. In the “temple sermon” attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, the Jewish people are exhorted to “not oppress the sojourner.”

Of course, the Israelites themselves were “strangers” during their enslavement in Egypt and their captivity in Babylon. The Hebrew Bible recognizes that every one of us can be a stranger and, for that very reason, we need to overcome our fear of those who live among us whom we do not know.

Within the New Testament, which Christians read in continuity with the Hebrew Bible or “The Old Testament,” the most often cited passage dealing with welcoming the stranger is from Matthew. This section speaks of the Final Judgment, when the righteous will be granted paradise and unrepentant sinners will be consigned to eternal fire. Christ says to those at his right hand that they are “blessed” because *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”*

The righteous then ask, *“When did we see you, a stranger, and welcome you?”*

Christ replies, *“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”*

As Matthew 25 makes clear, the Christians should see everyone as “Christ” in the flesh. Indeed, scholars argue that in the New Testament, “stranger” and “neighbor” are in fact synonymous. Thus, the Golden Rule, “love your neighbor as yourself,” refers not just to people whom you know – your “neighbors” in a conventional sense – but also to people whom you do not know. Even the difficult and disagreeable ones.

Beyond this, Paul in Ephesians, it is made clear that in Christ, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female.”* From this perspective, being “one in Christ” should be taken literally as acknowledging no fundamental differences in kind among human beings.

Of course, in Christianity the strong admonitions toward treating the stranger with dignity have coexisted with actions that would seem to indicate an opposite attitude: pogroms against Jews, medieval crusades, slavery, imperialism, and colonialism have been sanctioned by Christians who nonetheless would have affirmed biblical principles regarding caring for those who seem “other” or “alien.”

Indeed, when it comes to the specific questions concerning building a wall on America's border with Mexico or welcoming immigrants and refugees, some Christians would argue that doing so does not violate any biblical precepts concerning hospitality to the stranger, since the issue is one of legality.

Other Christians have taken a diametrically different positions, and have called for cities and educational institutions to be set apart as "safe zones" for undocumented immigrants.

It is true that the application of biblical principles to contemporary matters of policy is less than clear to the many Christians who have taken opposing sides regarding how the United States should deal with immigrants, undocumented workers and refugees. As for me, in my reading of the Bible, the principles regarding welcoming the stranger are broad-reaching and unambiguous.

Jesus' whole life was a witness to his Father's love, and Jesus calls his followers to carry on that witness in his Name. We, as followers of Jesus, are sent into this world to be viable signs of God's unconditional love. Thus, we are not first of all judged by what we say but by what we live. When people say of us: "See how they love one another," they catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced and are drawn to it as by a magnet.

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