



World Communion Sunday, October 7, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

***"Reaching Out: Time Around the Table"***

## THE INTRODUCTION TO THE READING

Some churches get the reputation of eating together *often*: potlucks, coffees, desserts, brunches, always food and refreshments! Well, there's a good reason for this.

The Gospels portray Jesus carrying out his ministry by sharing meals with others. He is also highly criticized for eating with undesirables. In Luke, for example, we read about the banquet at the home of Levi the tax collector, the scene at Simon the Pharisee's where a woman washes Jesus' feet with her tears, another time when Jesus doesn't wash his hands, and once where he criticizes the host for not inviting the poor and the lame. Jesus himself hosts the feeding of the 5000, invites himself to Zaccheus' place, institutes the Last Supper, and breaks bread with the travellers to Emmaus after his resurrection. In today's reading he is the guest of Mary and Martha.

Jesus practiced an *inclusive table fellowship* that mirrored the Reign of God and transformed all those around the table. So, no wonder that in Acts 2, also written by Luke – the text from which Bob preached last week – his church "broke bread" together at every opportunity with "glad and generous hearts."

## THE READING

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup>But 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.' <sup>41</sup>But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing.\* Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

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## SERMON

**I've always had sympathy for Martha! She knew that it takes time to set the table and reach out to others.**

Hospitality requires planning and implementation. As a 1<sup>st</sup> century middle-eastern matriarch, the responsibility fell squarely on Martha's shoulders to attend to a million details: to make sure the house was clean and welcoming; to prepare a meal from scratch that would satisfy their special guest – bread, vegetables; if there was to be meat, she had to see to its slaughter and cook it outdoors over an open fire.

When Martha snapped at Mary and Jesus, she had been running out of time and filling up with worry. After all, it was her deepest desire to connect with Jesus, and all the other tasks were getting in the way of this!

Over the years I've wondered if it might have made a difference had Martha had our modern utilities and appliances – at least water and electricity? She certainly could've made positive use of an open floor plan and an indoor kitchen with an island, right? Would these things have helped the visit go better?

Of course, even *with* all these amenities, *you and I* get just as anxious and overwhelmed as she did. I remember hearing of a mom and dad who were hosting Thanksgiving. They needed someone to say grace and enlisted their son – eleven or twelve years old – at the last minute. Nervous, he asked, "But what shall I say?" "Just say what you've heard us say." With all the guests assembled around the table, he prayed: "Dear Lord, why did we invite all these people to dinner?! Amen."

A church missionary observed: "It is ironic that the more affluent we become, the less hospitable we are. We're always so busy."<sup>1</sup>

**Yes, it takes time to set the table and reach out to others.** Communion Sundays at TriCon, for instance, call upon the deacons to do preparation and extra duties to set the table, and we are fortunate to have a lovely volunteer who bakes the bread!

It takes time to set the 'table' for mission and service, as well. Here at TriCon, our staff, committees, and volunteers do a good deal of planning, preparation, and publicity so that you and I can participate in events like the CROP Walk, serve at Open Table, understand where our special offerings are going, and volunteer through the Caring Connection.

**I've also always appreciated Mary, because she knew that it takes even more time to sit with others around the table.** To get to know our guests and those we are seeking to help, and they us, we have to stay put long enough to listen to and converse with them. The stories of the stranger, of our friends, and our own deserve to be heard. It was while she was

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<sup>1</sup>Joetta Handrich Schlabach, *Extending the Table...A World Community Cookbook* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 74. The author shares the story of Brenda, who was a missionary in Lesotho, and a piece of what Brenda learned from the people she served in ministry.

sitting at the feet of Jesus in dialogue about life and faith that Mary *connected* with him, herself, and God.

This encounter was an example of “relational ministry” – the term Bob used in his *Pastoral Perspective* in the October newsletter for what TriCon is about in reaching out. It also was an experience of “*koinonia*,” the concept Bob introduced in his sermon last Sunday from the account of the early church in Acts 2. To repeat: “Koinonia” is a Greek word that can be translated “community,” “sharing,” “participation,” “fellowship,” and “communion.”

For our forebears in the faith, communion at the Lord’s Table was never *just* celebrating the sacrament one Sunday, once a month during worship. The early church enacted communion time around the table at *potlucks*, during their *budget distributions* to those in need, and through *projects* of mission and service. As busy as it was, like Martha, the church in Acts took the time to set the table, and like Mary, to *sit* with others in *koinonia* at the table.

**Jesus reminds us all that we *have time around the table if we choose it. We can experience the connection with others that we say we long for.***

This fall our stewardship emphasis includes the opportunity of attending “pie parties,” time around the table with other church members to converse about TriCon’s mission and ministry, and bring into focus what the congregation needs to live into its call from God. This is not just a slick new way to get you to sign a pledge card of financial support for the coming year. It’s about being *church!* The social, spiritual, and missional connection that we all say we crave will actually happen as we take time to *sit* with one another.

One of the fun Voyager activities of last year was to visit and do crafts with residents in the assisted living at The Commons in Lincoln. It turned out to be a female gathering of *our* 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders and the elders of The Commons, many in their eighties. The Activities Director had arranged for paints, ribbons, doodads, wooden ornaments, and paper mache. Music played in the background, but it wasn’t long before it was drowned out by conversation and laughter across the generations! Mission that connects.

A missionary in Honduras, Joetta Handrich Schlabach, recounts how she experienced a new level of hospitality in the home of Gonzalo and Lilian Aleman there. This couple live with their six children in a small two-bedroom house, but they gave Joetta one of their three beds, all to herself. They generously shared their limited food with her *and* with guests who showed up unannounced. Amid *their* busy lives, the Aleman family made room for Joetta’s strange ways and questions. She decided that sitting with them at the table and sharing their stories, dreams, and struggles became “as essential as food and shelter.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Schlabach, *Extending the Table*, 18.

**Friends, around the table with Jesus there is *always* time.** Plenty of time! Let us enjoy this time at the table of communion, starting with moments of silent reflection!