

WGUMC October 20, 2013 Welcome Training
Luke 10:38-42

As I said, we've been talking about welcoming for a long while now. We welcomed the Word of God into our lives. We welcomed our true selves into God's presence. Then we thought about what it would mean to welcome others. Alison talked about welcoming orphans in Haiti. We talked about welcoming gays and lesbians and also the poor.

A few weeks ago, the Wednesday morning Bible study members were talking about welcoming and said, "It's great to talk about it, but how do we do it?" How can we welcome the poor, the immigrant, the homeless, the mentally ill, and the disabled into our lives when we're not sure how to welcome visitors into our worship? Where do we begin?

Now, back in the day, we would have set up a committee to study this problem and come up with a program to address it. My folk's church in Salem, Oregon gave out a fresh loaf of bakery bread to all visitors. The church I served in Eugene had

a group that made fruit pies and baked and delivered them hot out of the oven to the visitor's doorstep that very day.

Whatever the program, volunteers would be recruited, and the rest of us would smile and say, "Well, that's taken care of."

The old way worked in its day, but there was a downside, too. Whenever we have an official program and people to do something, the rest of us think we don't have to do it. With greeters each Sunday, we're tempted to think that it isn't our job to welcome visitors. I have news for the pews: it's your job. We can't delegate it just to the greeters and to the Al's and Dorothy's and Grace's of the world.

Each one of us has to do the work of welcoming. And I want to suggest that our job has two fundamental parts, described in our text this morning. Now we usually interpret the Mary and Martha story in a very one-sided way. Martha, the one who is preoccupied with preparing dinner for Jesus and his

followers, gets it wrong. And Mary, the one who sits and listens to Jesus, gets it right. Cut and dried.

But today, I argue that doing the work of welcoming means taking on the roles of both women. Teresa of Avila said: “To give our Lord a perfect hospitality, Mary and Martha must combine.”

In the church, we need to be Martha. We need to welcome each visitor as if he or she were Jesus. So we better put on a holiday feast, get out the best china, clean the carpets, rearrange the furniture, and spruce up the paint. These tasks are not beside the point. Where we put our energy and our money, sends a very strong message about how much we care for our visitors.

There are cobwebs in Kohlstedt Hall, coffee stains on the carpet, broken-down chairs for the early service. Those of us who have been here a while, love the place and love the people in it, and so we don't see it, maybe don't even care about it.

But visitors who don't love us yet do. And we wouldn't want them to conclude that we don't care about them. So, we're on our way with the renovations. New windows were installed this week. Next up: electrical upgrades and lights.

But we have to be careful. We all know churches that look good, have that new carpet smell, and still aren't doing a very good job of welcoming. And that's because doing Martha's work isn't enough. The church needs to be her sister Mary, too. Martha took care of the needs of the body, so that Jesus would feel loved and cared for. Mary listened, taking care of the needs of his spirit, the need everyone has for someone to listen to the words they speak and hear from the heart they bring.

Martha's work usually turns out to be expensive and very labor intensive, but Mary's job is every bit as costly. It costs us our time. It requires that we get out of our Sunday morning bubble to greet a stranger. It's scary because it makes us feel

Welcoming isn't a church program. You can't describe it in a glitzy brochure. You can't buy it from a bakery or pop it into the oven. True welcoming is each of us deciding that we didn't just come here to get a blessing today. We came here to be one. We are welcoming when we come to understand that it's not all about us. It's about the people seeking God around us. It's about our heart reaching out to their heart and welcoming them into God's heart.

We do that so well when we baptize babies. We make a big fuss over them. We put on a show, we make a pledge, we promise them our love and support, we sing to them. But baptism is once-in-a-lifetime and babies won't even remember it. We need to make a fuss, if you will, and make that same welcome available to everyone all the time, until they get the message that God loves them and forgives them. God will heal whatever hurts they have and give them hope. God has a promise and will give them new purpose.

That's what we say at baptism. Unfortunately, we can't baptize everyone who walks in the door, but we can still bless them. But only if we make the effort to meet them!

If you're shy like me, then you'll probably have some resistance to what I'm going to ask you to do. I'm going to challenge you to get out of your Sunday morning bubble and begin practicing the 10-foot rule. That means that you make a habit of greeting everyone you don't know within ten feet of you in the pew each and every Sunday morning. We want them to feel welcome the moment they come in the door, so get yourself here early and warm up the place for them!

You're going to tell me that you don't know who is a visitor and who isn't. I have that problem, too. But it doesn't matter why we don't know them; we need to welcome them. Even longtime members want to feel welcome. At any rate, you can't go wrong if you just introduce yourself: "Good morning. I'm Cindy. I don't believe we've met, but I'm glad you're here."

Or "I'm Ralph. I've been gone a lot lately, and I don't think I've seen you here before. I'm glad to meet you." Or "I'm Andy. I don't know everyone's names, but I'd be glad to know yours."

Once you give them your name, give them an opening to share something about themselves: "Are you new in the area?" "What brings you to church today?" "Is this your first time in a Methodist Church?"

This takes about sixty seconds. But after you greet them, don't retreat back into your bubble. Assist them during the service. Make sure they have a bulletin, show them how to use the hymnal, help them find the supplement. If they have children, explain the options and tell them not to worry if their kids are a distraction. If we're taking communion, give them some direction. Our pews should be full of ushers, folks who are intentional about ushering a visitor into a loving, welcoming relationship with us and with God.

At the end of the service, ask if you can escort them to the coffee hour or introduce them to one of the pastors. There might be another church member you want them to meet. If they seem hesitant, don't pressure them. Just tell them that you hope to see them again soon. No one will be offended by sincerity.

But more important than what you say to them is how well you listen to them. After seeing to their physical needs like Martha did, listen for their spiritual ones like Mary. They may surprise you and tell you that they came to worship because they just lost a family member or because they've recently moved here and are homesick. Sometimes just one word of encouragement from you can make God real for them.

I know of a church where the members share this greeting every Sunday: "We love you and there isn't anything you can do about it." Whether or not we say it, we'd better live it. That,

in a nutshell, is the 10-foot rule, and let's begin observing it today.