

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 19, 2020
Sermon: "Punk Church"
Scripture: At the Home of Martha and Mary
(from Luke 10:38-42)
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

At the Home of Martha and Mary

- Alida: As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to them.
- David: Opened her home! Yes, lunch, dinner, snack, for Jesus, 12 male disciples, maybe another eight or 10 friends, plus all the neighbors.
- Alida: Yes, and Martha had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said.
- David: How nice! So Martha opened her house to a huge crowd, and her sister Mary spent the day sitting at Jesus's feet, listening to what he said. Well, I guess, listening is important. And someone like Jesus doesn't drop by every day. Besides, why should men have all the benefit of Jesus? It's good that Mary sat right there with the men. Let her be a disciple.
- Alida: Back to the Bible story, David: Martha was distracted by all the preparation that had to be made. So she went to Jesus and asked him, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"
- David: Oh, good. One sister rats out the other to Jesus, complaining she has to do all the work, while Mary gets all the glory . . . and the day off.
- Alida: And Jesus answered, "Martha, Martha."
- David: Oh, my, that's not good. Jesus doesn't much like whining. You never say a name twice if you're happy and not with that tone, "Martha, Martha."

Alida: "Yes," he said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better."

David Mary chose what is better? To sit at Jesus's feet and nothing else? I wonder if he'd felt that way if Martha wasn't providing food and drink.

Alida: Jesus said, "Only one thing is needed. It's not scurrying about – there's a place for that. It's not hustle and bustle – there's a place for that. But sometimes, we need to be still, to settle down, to sit at Jesus's feet. And listen."

When I was a pastor in New York City, I lived near the airports, so when foreign religious dignitaries came to America, I'd be asked to host them. One Sunday, the head of Protestant Christians in the old Soviet Union was visiting, and I had him preach my Church. His sermon was based on our Scripture today, the intriguing story of those two sisters, Mary and Martha.

Jesus and his large group of disciples show up at their house. By then, Jesus was a popular figure, so people crowded into the house to see him, hear him, and be blessed by his presence.

In the ancient Middle East, hospitality was a top virtue, so Martha and Mary were responsible for the full range of hospitality services: welcoming, freshening up, food, drink, and all preparations that went into that—shopping, slicing, dicing, cooking, serving, and cleaning up for a house full of unexpected guests. It's clear from the Bible story that Martha was run ragged, doing everything herself because Mary was mesmerized by Jesus. She was quite taken, enthralled, entranced, a fan.

You don't take Alida to a Bruce Springsteen concert and send her to the concession stand to get food. And Mary didn't move from her seat either. Finally, Martha complained to Jesus, *who says in effect, Mary's doing her thing. You're doing yours. Don't whine.*

So, at my Church in Queens that visiting Soviet Christian leader told us, "You Americans are Martha with your Christian faith. You can scurry about, be busy, help the poor, evangelize, and have all kinds of ministries doing all kinds of things. In Russia, we are Mary. Under communism, we can only sit at the feet of Jesus and listen. Please don't look down on us."

That story is from about 1980. Here we are, 40 years later, and suddenly the Christian Church in America, including our little country "slice of heaven" Church, we are more Mary, less Martha.

In our 16th week of Covid-19 shutdown, we can't scurry about so much. We can't do all the things that 120 days ago were the hallmarks of this 300-year-old Church. We worked so hard to create a spirit of love, to truly function as a family. Hugs all around. High fives with all the kids. The choir up in the choir loft, singing to their hearts' delight. Five greeters every Sunday in the narthex, shaking every hand. Teenagers holding homemade bake sales on the lawn to help others. One slice of our Church headed off to Appalachia in the summer; another slice headed off to India in winter. Pivot House's Men's Gospel Choir raising the roof in song. Everybody filing out of Church, catching up with one another, shouting out to one another, waiting in line to greet the pastors, moseying over to coffee hour.

Think of 40 teenagers up here every May, getting Confirmed; a jam-packed service, followed by a special coffee hour in their honor afterward. Think of the Deacons' Picnic on the Sunday after Labor Day, with the entire Sunday School parading into the Church, then everybody going over to a barbecue on the lawn. Think of the Sunday School Christmas pageant, 90 kids all dressed up, from sheep and angels to the Holy Family, complete with a real baby Jesus. Think of Christmas Eve, six services from 10 AM to 11 PM, two, three, even four generations crammed into these old pews, like one gigantic 14-hour Church hug.

Think of 15 or 20 people squeezed into a small kitchen in Bridgeport Church, cooking and serving dinner for the hungry and lonely at St. George's. Think of our children in every Sunday School classroom, so happy that it is Sunday! Think of 80 to 90 to 100 high-schoolers in the Barn every Thursday night, being challenged to believe and to do in the spirit of Christ.

We are Martha: a scurrying about, welcoming everybody, looking after everybody Church, a Martha Church.

And now what? We are far away from one another, safely distanced, masked, remote, often unseen. Now, as your Church, we are on your cell phones, your iPads, your computer screens, TVs, or Facebook, YouTube. You can mute us, rewind us, share us, send us emojis, and click on "Likes." You can make us go viral. We have Zoom Bible Studies and daily devotions, funerals and baptisms. My short stories are online. Alida's children's messages are online. Marcia's Vacation Bible School, Sarah's children's choir, our mid-week alternative worship, Michael's concerts, our young Artists in Residence songs . . . all online.

We are 6 feet apart at best, miles apart most of the time. We don't actually "see" others. We don't really talk. We don't even air-kiss or fist-bump. We sit in the cubicle of our isolation. We can whine about it (that would be me!), or, like Mary, we can make the most of "sitting at the feet of Jesus," taking it all in, learning what we can.

The genesis of this sermon is an op-ed in *The New York Times* by a religion writer, titled "The Future of Christianity is Punk." Being a Punk music fan, Green Day all the way, and the Clash, that got my eye. I've wanted a Punk Church for years. Little did I know, it's the "future of Christianity." (Burton, Tara Isabella. "The Future of Christianity is Punk." *The New York Times*. May 10, 2020. p. SR4. Print.)

Now, let me explain Punk Rock. First, you had rock 'n' roll, with ever-evolving guitar geniuses, Eric Clapton, Dire Straits, Jimmy Page, virtuosos on the guitar—they can do anything with a guitar. Then came guys like me: three chords, play'em loud, do it over again. *Punk Rock*. Back to the basics.

Every endeavor has its basis. When I played baseball, if I went into a slump, I shortened my swing, even bunted a couple of times, and got back to the basics. Religion has its basics. For some Catholics it's back to Latin. For Episcopalians, back to the old-timey *Book of Common Prayer*. For some Christians it's let's try Greek and Russian Orthodox, with icons and incense.

For New Englanders, it could be back to simplicity. That's why we worship in this old square wooden box, an architectural gem of basic simplicity. That simplicity can also mean doing the things you *can* do when you *can't* do most everything you like to do.

You probably know that most big religious movements were led by somebody trying to simplify and get back to basics. Buddha did not found Buddhism. He was a Hindu. He was trying to simplify Hinduism. Martin Luther and all those reformers didn't set out to found Protestantism. They were Catholics, trying to get back to the basics. Jesus wasn't Christian. Jewish through and through, he tried to bring Judaism to the simple basics.

In a famous encounter, Jesus led his own mini-riot in the courtyard of the Holy Temple, taking a whip to all the folks who were exploiting Judaism and the Jewish worshipers. After he was finished with his one-man protest, disturbing the peace and vandalizing property, Jesus shouted, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all people." Not a moneymaking, merchandising, tourist-exploiting religious Disney World. Just: a "House of Prayer," For all. People. Period

Sometimes we get thrown back a bit by life. Job loss. A health scare. Empty nesting. You name it. The trajectory we were on, so comfortably, so

optimistically, gets interrupted. That's true in your life. That's true for Alida and me in our lives. That's true in your business. That's true in Church. So it's back to the basics.

For Jesus it's prayer, so let's let that be our bottom line. We all know all the things we can't do, in Church life, daily life, work life. But we can pray. Prayer is as simple as talking to God. No rules. No boundaries. Out loud or in your heart. Write it down. Email us, we'll pray for you. Drop by and light a candle. Or tell us to light one for you.

There are two old sayings about prayer worth repeating. When prayer was removed from public schools as an official act, people were upset. But someone said, "As long as there are math tests, there will be prayer in schools." The other saying is, "There are no atheists in foxholes." When things are tough, we pray. And things are tough. We are in a foxhole. This is not a time for theological debate. It's a time for prayer. Nothing more basic.

Another basic that nothing can take away is your Bible. Crack it open. Read it. Or Google it. Need help or a place to start? Contact us. The Bible is available in every way imaginable, from comic books to film. And follow us online. (Boy, that's something I never thought I'd say: "Follow us online"!) You may hate it, but it is our world for right now. You know what they say about the weather on Cape Cod? If you don't like it, wait a minute, and it will change.

Well, that is our world right now. There is no use complaining, as Martha learned when she whined to Jesus. So right now our Church world is online. Last Sunday we held our first public worship in 15 weeks, outdoors in front of this sanctuary, people spread out under shade trees, sitting on blankets and in beach chairs. Michael provided truly astounding music. In my welcome remarks, I confessed that all my life I have mocked TV religion and televangelists and radio preachers: Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, with their slick production and entertainment values all geared to a remote unseen audience, competing for ratings and audience share. And here I am, humbled, checking every day for our ratings, our "views" and "likes" and "shares." But that's our world of today, of now.

We often begin worship with the Psalm, "This is the day the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." We may wish it was last July 19, or early March before the shutdown, or already next March when there is an "all clear." But no. Today is today. "Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

The other day I was thinking of three of my favorite worship services here at Greenfield Hill Church. None of them took place in our sanctuary. None of them had the choir or the organ.

The first was January 2019, Martin Luther King weekend. The sanctuary floors were being redone, and we had to move worship to the Memorial Room, where we have our coffee hour. It was freezing, with torrential rain. We had Darwin on violin and his wife stuck playing the world's worst piano. Half of Alida's sermon was on videotape, Dr. King on a large-screen TV. *And it was perfect.*

The second was early last summer, one of our early morning outdoor worship services led by Church families. We were over in the grove next to the playground. Music was on an iPhone, and the sermon involved everyone. People talked freely and lovingly and spiritually about being gay, being Black, being White, being who we are with whatever hang-ups or prejudices or wounds, all trying to grow in faith, to be Christlike. *It was perfect.*

And then there was last Sunday. Alida and I on the front steps. You on the lawn. Wendy singing "Amazing Grace." Michael on the carillon. An oboe and cello performance worthy of any stage. An old Bible story, simply applied. It was perfect. All we were used to, all we yearn for, all we grew up with—not there, not yet, not now. *And it was perfect.*

So . . . beginning August 2, we'll have outdoor worship every other Sunday. I'll keep recording my short stories and putting them on YouTube. Alida and Marcia will keep driving around town with their iPhones, making Sunday School videos for kids and families. Our young musicians will keep making inspiring hit-song videos that lift your spirits. And in this old white wooden box Church, our video team will keep bringing worship to you. Fresh ideas. New ways. Creative energy. And one thing we always count on, an old, old story making sense for today.

That is, after all, why we are *here*, even if you're *out there*. God bless you.

Our closing hymn today is "Rejoice You Pure in Heart," No. 15.

*Rejoice, You pure in heart,
rejoice, give thanks, and sing;
your festal banner wave on high,
the cross of Christ your King.*

*Refrain:
Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice, give thanks, and sing!*

*Bright youth and snow-crowned age,
both men and women, raise
on high your free, exulting song you wondrous praise.
[Refrain]*

*Still lift your standard high,
still chanting four ratings an audience share sleep as you
go,
from youth to age, by night and day,
in gladness and in woe.
[Refrain]*

*At last the march shall end;
the wearied ones shall rest,
the pilgrims reach their home at last,
Jerusalem the blest.
[Refrain]*

*Praise God, who reigns on high,
the Lord whom we adore:
the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
one God forevermore.
[Refrain]*