

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Family Ministry"
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Holy Monday

One of the best things about this job, that is, the full time vocation of pastoral ministry, is being in each other's homes. I suppose the term "home care" brings all kinds of political and personal reflections on making sure that we take care of one another, and it is done best in a person's home. Now about what we pay workers to do and what kinds of illnesses can be taken care of at home and all the rest is a big discussion in itself. As a case in point, some of you know that Mrs. Hamlyn was in her home for 71 years, and recently passed away after a brief stay in hospital. There is something special about visiting a person in their home. I'm not sure it is becoming a dying part of pastoral ministry as all the other challenges and duties of the position do make it difficult to make the time for home visits. Also, frankly, many are rarely home, due to the time in history we find ourselves with everyone working outside the home, except perhaps the family pet, and even then, some animals apparently are quite photogenic and get the occasional part time job, with the owner as agent.

Being in someone's home introduces a person to their day to day living, their routine, their family, both those living in the house, and those living away. It gives you a sense of what they like, what is important to them, and even if you only see the formal living room which only the Minister gets to visit and normally is not lived in, you still get a sense of a family, that you cannot get meeting someone at the church building, or the hospital, or the community hall.

I believe this is the case throughout much of history. You get a different sense of meeting someone on the road, as opposed to in their home. Just as Jesus met with Mary, Martha and Lazarus in their home, we receive new insights into what their home was like. It was not always a fact that Martha did all the cooking and cleaning, although she was serving the meal in John 12. I say this because in John 11:21ff, we hear Martha's faith expressed. In the midst of the tragedy of her brother's death, she has the courage to say: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." (TNIV) We can hear tremendous faith in the conversation with the culmination being, Jesus telling Martha that he is the resurrection and the life. "Anyone who believes

in me will live, even though they die.” This is perhaps one of the most spiritual conversations with the Lord in the New Testament and we may be surprised to recognize that it is a conversation with Martha, not Mary. Now to be fair to Mary, when she meets Jesus, also on the occasion of her brother's death, she says the exact same thing that Martha did, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mary's faith is seldom doubted. But Jesus, in response to Mary, weeps with her, rather than engaging in any theological discourse. I believe that this is something we need to learn to do in the appropriate times as well, as we are able.

I've entitled tonight's sermon “Family Ministry” because we do get something of an intimate portrait from the Apostle John on the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We learn something new about all three members of the family. We may not consider it something new that Martha was serving that day in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, about three kilometers from Jerusalem on the road to Jericho. Yet I want to point out is that even the most spiritual among us are often called to serve. You know that the church would not be able to function or even have its doors open, if individuals were not willing to serve. Many of us might want to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him, but we would eventually need to eat, and as Presbyterians are want to do, would eat well. The ministry of service is not something to put down or to take for granted. I think the record of Luke 10: 38 – 42 is clear about choosing Jesus as first priority, yet there is no denigration of the serving Martha does. It is more her worry and her upset the Lord wants to address. And so he does continually in our own lives. We need to be quite aware of our own areas of worry and upset, to be able to be transformed by the Lord in these areas. Also as we admit and confess our worries and the things that upset us in small groups, God brings healing and care as the small group functions as the church at the moment. So part of the family ministry that we have is service. Another part is the bearing of burdens and the healing of those weighed down with worries and concerns.

It's also good for the leadership of the church to ask where a person might be able to serve, and continually have opportunities for service. Sometimes all our positions of service are already filled and it's hard for a new person to be able to fit in to serve. And this happens even as those serving get more and more tired. So it's a good thing to talk regularly about how to include new people in serving. Similarly, when a person has worries and concerns, what group might that person be able to safely take those issues and receive the love and care of Christ in the group.

That's Martha, what about Mary? Mary is the certainly the centerpiece person in John 12 (excluding Judas at this point, we'll talk about him on Wednesday). Mary gives extravagantly and intimately to the Lord. She doesn't apparently reflect much on the cost of what is being poured out, just that she needs to do this. Her wiping the Lord's feet with her hair is the intimate part and perhaps a prelude to the Lord's washing the disciples' feet. But the point I think here is the extravagant giving.

Where in the year do we give extravagantly as a church? Where in our personal lives do we give extravagantly? In teenage years, I decided to major in Religious Studies, which has no financial benefit, very few job prospects. But because my father was generous enough to support me through this, I poured out those four years, and did Linguistics too, to follow a possible course of Bible Translation with Wycliffe Translators, Teaching, or Pastoral Ministry. Perhaps I was just too foolish or naive to think about the finances of it all. But in the end, I just kept pouring my life Jesus' way. Some would say I've lived on and my family has lived on charity now since at least 1983, 27 years. That's one way I think about giving, giving of our lives and the direction of our lives in Jesus' direction. My wife, Lynn, giving up her career in the lab, cancer research and allergy research and lung health studies and the like, she gave up to homeschool our two daughters. It was a costly oblation, a pouring out of her life for theirs. Every parent makes decisions such as these to make sure their children grow up well.

What are the areas that you have poured out your life for others, for Jesus? Some things may be long ago. Some may be right now. May I suggest you consider a costly giving of yourself and your resources, as a testimony to what God is doing in your life?

So that's Martha and Mary, there is one more member in the family, who is somewhat quiet in the background. He doesn't say much, but boy, when he does, you want to listen. This is Lazarus. One reference work I looked up said that the present day town of Bethany has been re-named 'el-'Azariyeh which is the Arabic for Lazarus. Just seeing Lazarus caused some people to believe. Apparently he didn't have to even preach. He was just there. Some people call this "presence ministry." You just hang out with people and if you are following Jesus, or if you have had an encounter with Jesus, as Lazarus did, then you have an impact. Some knew he had died, for four days, but here he was. This was enough for many to people their faith and

trust in Jesus. And the chief priests were not happy with this. They added Lazarus to their hit list. What kind of “presence ministry” do our congregations have? Are we available for others to see what Jesus is doing in our lives? Have you noticed how powerful this family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus is together? They have put together service, and extravagant giving and the testimony of one who had been dead but was now alive. This was a powerful family ministry.

Every family has a ministry. Not that we are all “full-time professional pastoral caregivers” but that each of us and our families have a story to share. We are not perfect. Neither were Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Perhaps that is why we are allowed to see how disturbed Martha is in the first family vignette in Luke. We all have family issues. Yet we also all have something to say about the difference Jesus Christ has made in our lives. Paul talks about boasting about his weaknesses. I have many. Others in Paul's time wanted to blow their own horns. But like Paul, we can still minister and direct others to the loving and powerful ministry of Jesus who came this week to remind us of all he gave to have relationship with us. He reminds us this week of all he gave to continue his mission through the church. We have hundreds of years of history between our two congregations of seeking to be the body of Christ here in St. John's.

We have much to steward and much to learn. Maybe one thing we can learn from this family home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus is that our ministries are all invitations into the family of the body of Christ. We join our two families, St. Andrew's and St. David's, a few times during the year, Holy Week, the June picnic, and sometimes with visitations and pulpit exchanges to say that we need each other. We do. We need to help each other with groups open to each other, as several already are, and minister to each other in the extended family as God gives us grace. I know Dave and I try to help each other and encourage each other. We don't always agree. But we always work things out, and we grow together.

You may be aware of the history of the Presbyterian church in this province. Many churches have been closed in the last fifty years. Some may be fearful of closing more in years to come. But instead of giving in to that fear, we thought, in the Presbytery, that we might reach out in faith and start a new family on the Avalon, something that would complement what we are currently doing. But we know that there are only 8 or 9 of us in the Presbytery. We count on the rest of the family to help us, to get excited with

the possibilities, to recognize we need another congregation for the health of our movement in this province and area. My last challenge to you in this time of talking about family ministry is to simply ask you to pray about the founding of a new congregation, exactly where we should start it and some strategy on how all current Presbyterians can help us with work... We want to see it as ours, not somebody else's. We want to see it as a reversing of the trend of fearing for our existence and our survival, and placing our faith in the Lord who raised Lazarus from the dead. He is the One who we can trust to turn around our church and bring a new family into the fold. It's not just for Presbyterians, but for everyone who needs the Good News of Jesus Christ and who wants to see the family of God expand.

Let us trust our God for our family ministries.

Let us pray.