My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

In my neighborhood in Windham, we all live on 2 acre lots and the neighbors know one another by waving at each other from our driveways as the cars drive by or the dog-walkers saunter past our homes. But when I first moved into our New Hampshire neighborhood in 2004, I didn’t realize how much I really didn’t know anybody that I had seen doing the waving and walking thing. I was too busy traveling as a consultant and away from home. But my late wife Debbie had a series of health events that took her health and then her life, and she died. I’d only been in the neighborhood for a little over a year, a newcomer by New Hampshire standards.

In my grief that next day, I was desperately searching for stories of Debbie beyond those I knew as her husband. I knew her as a loving woman who would give her heart and help to anyone who asked. And although I knew that fact, I needed to hear it from others. It was a selfish request, but I was grieving and needed more balm than I had available those first few days after she died. I needed affirmation of her compassion, of her heart, and her Sprit. If I could grasp that as strongly as if I were holding her hand again, I’d feel her alive again, I thought.

So I sent invitations to folks I barely knew, up and down the block, explaining that Debbie had died, and I asked them to come and share with me any stories they had about any encounters with her. I would host a light reception at my house that weekend. I was not sure who, if anyone, might show up. But they came.

Out of respect, pity, solidarity, curiosity—I don’t know why they came that day, but it reinforced in me the power of relationships, and that I had spent all my time focused on my career and traveling and running away from relationships. I needed their stories, but it also required a change from me to keep those stories coming. Waving and driving by wasn’t enough. So I made it a point to open my house to folks and not just wave but talk to anyone I saw out and about. These days, Kate and I host semi-annual parties so that we can keep on more that just waving to each other. We gather, face-to-face, to re-connect at least twice a year with joys, sorrows, news, and just giving hugs and handshakes that start the road to being in relationship.

I’m a pretty good host, I’ve been told, welcoming people, showing hospitality, making them feel good for coming out and coming over. But this is where I can really identify with Martha in our scripture today.

I like having people over, enjoying the camaraderie and feeling that we’re building neighborliness. But I am constantly scanning the rooms, worried that people are not in conversation or helping themselves to another plate or refilling a glass of wine, with the nagging feeling that I’m responsible for everyone having a good time.

We’ve all been there. We tidy up before the guests arrive. Will the house be presentable? What about any food allergies, do we have alternatives for everyone? Did Grace drag into the house a bunch of long-dead leaves and sticks in her fur from when she was just outside a few minutes ago? Wait, do we have enough desserts? Any of these questions can be wrapped up in the statement, “Will we be ready before the guests arrive?”

The worrying has, at times, left me emotionally drained, and it takes away from my ability to be present when the guests actually do arrive. Ever been overwhelmed that we lose the joy of fellowship, the major point of opening the doors in the first place? We do the work to make space for the gift of fellowship, and yet we do not allow ourselves the gift of time shared.

And here Martha of our Bible and Martha Stewart collide. Both Martha’s want to be good hosts. Both are focused hosting duties in their home, making sure everyone is having enough food and drink. Maybe there are other minor details weighing them down, such as who left early and why or who is not there and hoping they’re okay. Our scripture says that hospitality is sacred, even back to the story of Abraham and the angels in Genesis. But Jesus suggests that somehow Martha’s hospitality is misplaced, that Mary has chosen the better way. And it made me think: we know Mary felt cared for by Jesus. But did Martha feel cared for by Jesus as well?

We find ways to diminish ourselves. It takes a lot to dim the critical self that simply wants to stop and bask in the love of God, pursuing life in God’s presence rather than God as an afterthought when there’s kids to raise, shopping to do, cleaning and laundry, and God knows (he really does know) what else on our task list. And we tend to minimize mystics, those who speak of life here but not here, of an ideal that should be for all of us but which we too easily dismiss as impractical. We find it all too comfortable to busy our hands and minds, keeping us focused on conformity to expectations to what was rather than giving our talents to build what can be. It takes a lot to live basking in God’s love rather than being busy, because we simply aren’t comfortable surrendering to the one who created us. It’s just impractical, right?

But Jesus never says for us not to care about the stuff of everyday life. He’s concerned with the totality of our life experience, all of it—what we worry about, the work we do, the hurts and joys of the heart, mind, soul, and Spirit. And I think when Mary sits at Jesus’ feet we get a glimpse of this, because we can still ourselves to hear God’s clear voice of peace and love absent our own noisy brains of worry and fear. It’s that moment, when we let go of the Martha Stewart attention to detail that taxes us to our limits, that we can understand life elements we need to attend to in order to cope with our lives through God’s eyes and ears. God helps us prioritize the better part, not to be taken away, says the scripture. Martha is blessed too. So is Martha Stewart.

But somewhere in the tasks and details of both Marthas, Jesus is saying it’s sufficient, and to rest and restore. We need that rest of God to be present to others. And after all—that presence to others is what relationships are all about. Jesus is trying to show us the better path to relationships in our lives.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

I’m getting better at my hosting urges. I don’t try and create every dish anymore. We order a giant ham from the Honeybaked ham store, and the parties are potlucks, and we enjoy seeing what new recipes come into our home. Our house is what it is, sometimes a mud-tracked mess if it’s raining the day of the party.

I learned those many years ago that I valued the stories that I missed along the way, and that I cannot always recapture them once those events have passed. I worry less about the many tasks of hosting, and I’m trying to place my priority on fellowship and the joy of presence. Kate and I are figuring out that big parties may also not be the thing. We’re hosting smaller and more frequent dinner parties with couples. Grace, our dog, likes those perhaps a little better than big gatherings, because she gets to lick the platters as well as the plates.

As we try to balance Martha and Mary in our hearts, and we can start to hear the teacher in the other room, we might go to listen. Maybe one day we’ll sit down, but until then, my hope is that you also know that God cares for us. Because whether I’m Martha or Mary that day, I know I’m loved.

Thanks be to God, Amen.