

Practicing Loving Presence

On this lovely mid-summer morning in the season of Pentecost (a season that invites us to hold ourselves attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit), we recognize the gift it is to be freely gathered for worship on the live stream and in this space – on land loved by First Nations and others before us and where we are now weaving ways of community. I invite you to join your hearts with mine in prayer.

God of steadfast loving presence, speak a fresh word to each of us this morning. Guide our hearts and our minds as we consider the stories of the Samaritan man and his battered neighbor, Martha and her sister Mary. Help us to feel our way toward sharing more fully in your loving presence. We pray as followers of Jesus. Amen.

Several weeks ago, on a mid-June Wednesday evening, I attended a candlelit vigil at our State Capitol in memory of recently assassinated Minnesota House Speaker Emerita Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark. We also held space to honor Senator John Hoffman and his wife Yvette as they were being treated for injuries. I experienced loving presence that evening.

Because I had not known the Hortmans personally, my aim was to show up in my clerical collar and a stole to bear witness to the grief I anticipated would be palpable. I hoped to share compassion through simple eye contact and quiet presence. As early evening gave way to mid-evening, I found that there was plenty of space to move forward within the crowd and to be able to view the memorial directly. I watched as community members placed candles, flowers, stuffed animals and other objects on the memorial with tender care.

As I quietly watched, I noticed that the adult children of the deceased as well as Governor Walz and his spouse were being ushered into the area. Before I knew it, the governor was standing two feet directly in front of me.

The next thing I noticed was a grieving community member interacting with the governor, expressing her outrage and sadness. The governor looked her in the eye, affirmed her feelings as he took them in. Then he embraced her, holding her head against his shoulder and the side of his head against hers. I assumed the woman must be a family member of the governor or the Hortmans.

I continued to watch as that woman, whom I know as my friend Rach, shared in expressions of grief with those standing near her. I noticed that, while I had been handed an electric candle at the entrance to the capitol grounds, Rach didn't have a candle in hand. After a minute or so, uninhibited and spontaneous as I can tend to be (while vaguely recognizing that a bodyguard stood on either side of us), I reached out and tapped Governor Walz on the sleeve. He turned toward me, looking a bit surprised or confused. I asked him if he thought the woman would appreciate the candle I had in my hand (which I was planning to take home to my son Sam for his worship leading enjoyment). Governor Walz then swiftly replied, "Oh, sure!" He took it from me and handed it off to Rach. Then he turned back to me, hands at heart center, and offered his thanks.

Later in the evening, after the grieving family and the Governor and his spouse had been ushered away, I struck up conversation with Rach. I learned that she had served as a Student Senator in the 2000s (working with both Speaker Hortman and Senator Hoffman) and that she now works at the Target Center stadium. She navigates life with deaf blindness. We communicated by taking turns writing on a white board she carries with her.

That evening will stay with me always. I was deeply moved by how people drew near to one another, seeing and embracing each other in shared grief.

"An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.’

And [Jesus] said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’”

I was raised in a faith tradition in which we tended to conflate eternal life with an afterlife – as in, eternal life began when a person died and went on forever after that (either in heaven or hell). I hear in the question asked by the student of Torah a longing for eternal life as steadfast, forever connection to the love of God through his heart, soul, strength, mind, and loving presence with others.

Jesus offers that student and us a story to help us see what it takes to practice loving presence as an avenue for staying grounded in the eternal love of God. I invite us to hear again (perhaps with eyes closed) just one small part of the parable:

“But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”

Friends, what was involved in that Samaritan person practicing loving presence with one who was culturally his enemy?

The Samaritan traveler **saw** the Jewish traveler. A slowed enough pace was needed for the Samaritan to see the Jew.

He was **moved with compassion**. The Samaritan’s heart needed to remain tender through the many ebbs and flows of everyday life.

He **drew near**. There needed to be a practiced impulse to step out of his comfort zone.

He **bandaged and treated him**. The Samaritan man needed to be willing (without much pause) to engage in the mess – to be uncomfortable.

He **let the neighbor be carried by his own animal**. The Samaritan was willing to make a sacrifice of his own privilege or his own priorities in order to care for another.

He **brought him to an inn, and took care of him**. The man was needing to be willing to follow through on his expression of compassion.

I invite us to wonder today: **Toward and with whom might you be longing to more faithfully practice loving kindness? And from which of the Samaritan's particular moves might you most need to take note?**

Do you want to practice a slower pace?

Do you want to practice less guardedness and more tenderness?

Do you want to practice challenging yourself to move out of your comfort zone more often?

What kind of painful human mess might you be willing to get yourself dirty in?

Are there some sacrifices you could and might need to make in order to show deeper and more steadfast compassion?

Could you build deeper trust with some by following through on a consistent basis when you offer support and care?

As I asked earlier in the service, I wonder: **For you, what barriers get in the way of loving your neighbor?** They say to 'expect the unexpected.' I think we actually need to make ourselves available first and be in a posture of loving presence in order to welcome the unexpected.

Now, *“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?’”* When we overdo it, we are less able to be present and connecting with our neighbor.

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

I don’t think that listening to the rabbi was better than offering hospitality. Mary chose to practice loving presence in a way that aligned with her nature (which seemed to be as a receptive listener). Martha started our practicing loving presence in a way that aligned with her nature (offering hospitality). But she went off course when she over functioned to such an extent that she moved out of alignment with her nature and into comparing herself with her sister.

Here I would like to share again our opening words from a neighbor, read at the start of our worship service. Author, mental health advocate, and supporter of fellow Black entrepreneurs, Michell C. Clark writes, *“Maybe the reason we're all so exhausted isn't that we're doing too much, but that we're doing too many things that are out of alignment with who we are.”*

May we take with us the stories of this day – the story of the Samaritan and the Jew along the road, the story of Martha and Mary in their differences both seeking to practice loving presence, and my experience of the vigil at the Capitol. May we stay tenderhearted, aware, open to one another – that we might practice loving presence in ways that are deeply aligned with the gifts God has given each of us. Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
July 20, 2025 | 6th Sunday after Pentecost
“Where Two, Where Three: A Blessing,” Luke 10:25-42