

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But 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? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

## SERMON

One of the most difficult parts of my life is to find balance. I tend to do things in streaks. At Christmas, with a little help from my daughter, I go on a movie-watching binge. One year when Sally went south to be with her ailing mother Sara and I saw four movies in a single day. When you think of it, that is way too much popcorn.

When I read, I'll finish several books in a row, and read until early in the morning. When I am writing I prefer to write as many hours in the day as I can stay awake.

There are many things I value in life...reading, working, exercising, spending time with friends, time with family, following athletics, sleeping, gardening, and eating well. I often am successful at several of these, but seldom all of them. When I am tired I blow off things that are very important to me. Maintaining a balance in my life is very difficult.

The same thing is true in my life of faith. I recognize that there is so much to being a Christian. There is so much that needs happening to nurture our life with God. When I add all of the things I just mentioned and then add prayer and public service I usually end up failing in more than one area.

To get to this week's lesson we need to start with last week's story. A religious scholar, a man who studied Jewish law, tested Jesus with this question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus turned the question back at him saying, "What answer do you find in scripture?"

The scholar responded, "Scripture says that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength and all our mind. And we are to love our neighbor as ourselves."

The first thing that impresses us about the answer is the balance. Love God with our heart, our soul, our strength,

and our mind. Let God be your passion and your warmth. Let your love come from every area of your existence.

Years ago I attended a conference in Detroit. It was during the Vietnam War. One of the main speakers was Clarence Jordan, the man who was the inspiration behind Habitat For Humanity. (He didn't start HFH, but the idea grew up on his farm.) Jordan, who founded an inter-racial community in Georgia before the Civil Rights movement first talked about the Christian attitude toward race, received an enthusiastic response. When he talked about the Christian opposition to war the room got very uncomfortable. After the speech I attended a feed-back session. Virtually no one asked about race, which took the major part of his speech. Several people were quite disturbed about his war comments. An angry man stood up and said, "Are you saying that if I don't oppose the war I'm not a Christian?"

Jordan looked shocked and said, "Oh my no. There is so much to being a Christian. None of us can do it all."

I have pondered that comment for over 40 years. He was right. Only one person did it all, and they hung him on a cross. If we can't do it all does it mean that we ought not to try? Suddenly, we are back to the balance issue again. The primary balance that I seek is the balance between understanding the faith and doing the faith. It is between loving God and serving God. It is between the study of God's word and the caring for God's people.

The scholar, called, the lawyer, in last week's story asked Jesus just who this neighbor was that he was to love. Jesus then told him a story about a helpful or good Samaritan who discovered a wounded traveler along the road. The Samaritan provided minor first aid, put the victim on his beast of burden and took him to a motel where he not only paid for his room, but promised to pay his future bills. The helpful Samaritan was a neighbor to the one who fell among the robbers. The story ended with these words of Jesus ringing in our ears, "Go and do likewise."

Some people think that the reason we all know and love this story is that it is a great story. I think the reason this story makes sense is because of the storyteller. We know that it is a true story, whether it ever took place or not, because of Jesus. Jesus is the good or helpful Samaritan. Jesus was forever stopping along the side of the road to help someone. He stopped along the road to heal a leper and to engage little Zacchaeus, a despised man. Jesus said, "I will eat with you." Jesus stopped along the road to listen to a blind beggar (Bartimaeus) who cried out for help. He was walking along the road when he saw a funeral procession for the only son of a widow from Nain. Jesus brought him back to life. Jesus applauded a woman who snuck up behind him on the road and touched the hem of his garment. And Jesus is the one who told the woman caught in the act of adultery that he

didn't condemn her, though he did tell her not to sin anymore. Who is it that stopped along the side of the road to aid a person in need? Jesus. We love the story of the Good Samaritan because it points to Jesus, the Good Samaritan.

As soon as we finish that story we find Jesus at one of the few places where he could relax. He was in the village of Bethany, just across the Kidron Valley and up the hill near the Mount of Olives, a 25 minute walk from the heart of Jerusalem. Bethany was the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. When he was in Jerusalem, it appears, Jesus spent days at the temple, but his nights in Bethany where he bathed in the hospitality of Martha and Mary. Jesus once said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 5:7) We should say, nowhere, but Bethany, which appears to be a place of refuge, peace, rest and love for him.

One day while he was in Bethany Mary joined him in the sitting room, a room normally reserved for men. In the sitting room men talked about "important things," such as the crops, the government, and religion. Women were literally in the kitchen talking about "unimportant things," such as food, children, and other things families need to exist. Women virtually never got involved in men's conversations.

Women in the first century prayed quietly, and were involved in lighting the candles at Shabbat, but were exempt from the daily prayers in the temple and excused from the learning in the synagogue, so they could perform acts of hospitality and care for families. Therefore it is surprising to see that Mary is sitting where men sat as Jesus taught. She was learning with the men.

In the meantime Martha was preparing the meal, playing the role of hostess, being helpful. Learning and hospitality are both necessary. Both are healthy. Add the two – learning and serving and you have great balance. Both should be praised. The only difficulty is when the one who learns deprecates the one who serves or the one who serves deprecates the one who learns.

Martha asked Jesus to tell Mary to come and help her. (How is that for communication—Martha asks Jesus to ask Mary to help Martha.) Some people feel as if Jesus belittled Martha, and with her, all others who provide hospitality. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus responded to Martha who wanted two things: help in the kitchen and Mary to start acting like a woman, not a man.

Jesus spoke tenderly to Martha. He used her name twice: Martha, Martha--dear, dear Martha, you are getting worked up needlessly. Mary has chosen the better part. Jesus affirmed Mary's right to learn and discuss. We are not talking about hospitality instead of learning, we are talking about hospitality and learning. It isn't reflection or service it is reflection and service.

Women were an intricate part of every aspect of the ministry of Jesus. At times they cooked and provided meals. They also acted as patrons, subsidizing his ministry. Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection, and the first evangelists. If they were to do important work they needed

to learn, to grow. They needed to be invited to the places men normally gathered where the learning took place.

The same trend continued with Paul. Lydia organized the Philippian church, which met in her home. Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquila, was a partner of Paul and did a great deal of teaching.

The battle for the rights of women in the church is not over. This past week a spokesman for the Vatican chose to lump women's ordination in the same category as pedophilia. My hunch is that he would like to take that statement back and start over. Once again we see what happens when an organization operates with few women in key leadership positions. My guess is that a woman would have communicated the concern in a much different way.

Once again, this story makes sense because it is about a man who was centered and balanced. The two stories together invite us to live a balanced life – to love God with our hands, and our minds. To serve our brothers and sisters by thinking through important issues, and for providing whatever is needed for a bodily life.

Ultimately, however, these are stories about Jesus, the son of God, the man for others, who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for all. It is about Jesus Christ who sent his followers "into all the world, to preach the gospel to all people, and baptize them." This is about Jesus, the one who welcomed little children, who was willing to have lunch with those who were despised, who cared for rich and poor, men and women and declared, through his spokesman Paul, that there really are no differences any more.

This is a story that urges us to have balance in our life. Dag Hammarskjöld was right, "*In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.*" Doing the faith and not just believing the faith is critical. But at the same time we need to understand the faith. With the helpful Samaritan we bind the wounds of our sisters and brothers and with Mary we sit at the feet of Jesus, who is the embodiment of this good teaching.

Amen. © 2010