

# The Bethel Pulpit

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**BETHEL**

LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Text: Luke 10:38-42

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

As I was working on my sermon for today, at some point early on, I called up my wife, Beth. I called her to ask permission to share in my sermon something about the way that the two of us interact with one another in a particular situation.

So, I called Beth at her work on Thursday and I shared with her what I had in mind – I told her that in my sermon I wanted to talk about the way that the two of us typically take on the role of hosts at the parties that we have at our home. Beth cautiously gave me the green light to do this, but with one disclaimer (which I have to say felt more like a warning). She said, “Do not make me look bad!!”

So, with that disclaimer – that warning from Beth – I decided that it just might be best if I went in a completely different direction with the focus and approach of my sermon. (Pause)

In all seriousness, as Beth and I talked about the way that we each “behave” at our get-togethers – the way we prepare, the way we serve, the way we interact with our guests, on and on – (as we talked) I began to appreciate more and more this rather strange story that we find in Luke’s Gospel about Mary and Martha and Jesus.

At our house, I am the Martha when it comes to parties. I am the one having the pangs of nervous energy that seem best fed with the comforting dish of busy work.

So before, during and after most of our parties, I am running around – making sure there is enough food, making sure that people have drinks, making sure our dogs are behaving themselves, making sure of this and that. I tend to not sit down much or have long drawn out conversations. I am on the go.

Beth, on the other hand, is very chill. She helps with the prep work and all that, but she does not worry about the details in the same way that I do. She

trusts that things will be just fine. “These are our friends, John,” she often says, “the party is going to be absolutely great and everyone will have fun – don’t worry.”

With that I typically grumble under my breath something like, “Yeah sure, it will be fine – once the bathroom is cleaned, the carpet is vacuumed, the dishwasher is empty, the beverages are chilled, the food is made, the lawn is mowed, etc.”

When our friends begin to arrive, I continue to run around like a mad man doing this and that, and Beth is simply present with our guests – present to talk, to laugh, to listen.

Maybe you see yourself in one of those two roles.

And maybe you see your spouse, your partner, a friend, a sibling in one of them as well.

As I am in that role – as I am preparing, serving, helping, cleaning, and doing all that other stuff that I am convinced is really important – it does not take long before I begin to feel some resentment percolating inside of me and it is directed squarely at Beth.

That resentment often times turns into a rambling thought that goes something like this, “I am doing all the work for this party! Beth is just trusting that everything is going to be fine! And once everyone arrives, I know she isn’t going to do anything more than sit around and talk with them – which means I have to do all the work! This is not fair!!” (Pause)

“Martha, Martha” Jesus begins his response. After Martha had said much the same thing to Jesus about her sister Mary, that I thought about my dear wife Beth, Jesus gently and lovingly tells her that what Mary is doing is okay, in fact, it is more than okay, it is needed and necessary.

As we dive into this story, it is really important to understand what Jesus is and is not saying (I suppose that is true as we dive into any text where Jesus is saying something, but I guess I will say it is even more important in this one.) For example, Jesus is not saying that helping, serving, and caring for others are bad things to do.

In fact, the passage just before our reading for today

in Luke 10 is the parable of the Good Samaritan – a parable lifting up the importance of helping, serving, and caring. It is one of the great parables that Jesus told – perhaps one of the two or three parables that many Christians know by heart – it is the parable about a man beaten and left for dead on the side of a road. The beaten man is ignored first by a priest and then by another holy man. Finally, he is helped by a Samaritan – Samaritans are a group of people that those hearing the parable would have hated. And it is this man who is the neighbor.

This parable is completely about the importance of helping, serving, and caring for others – Jesus tells us that showing compassion and mercy and love in the way the Samaritan did is the way we are to behave towards others.

Many theologians make the argument that the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha need to be understood together. The Samaritan embodies love for the neighbor; Mary embodies love for God – BOTH are lifted up by Jesus as examples of positive discipleship.

Yet, in the time of Jesus, both the Samaritan and Mary were socially disqualified from being models of anything good according to the norms of their culture – the Samaritan because he and all Samaritans were considered unclean and viewed with contempt and Mary because she was a woman - a woman who was just sitting around and should instead know her place.

So, we have two images held up as examples for us by Jesus – the Good Samaritan and Mary – (two images) rejected as anything positive by the kingdoms of the world, yet two images that are profoundly present in the kingdom which Jesus brings.

Martha welcomed Jesus into her home and when she did, she functioned in much the same way that I function when I welcome guests into my home – Martha was occupying here time with busy work.

Mary welcomed Jesus and when she did, she functioned in much the same way that Beth functions – Mary was simply present.

Instead of trying to provide the perfect “thing” for Jesus, Mary understood that the perfect “thing” had already been provide – it was and is Jesus himself.

His presence was all that was needed. To be anywhere but at his feet had to have seemed crazy to Mary. “How could I be anywhere else?” she had

to have wondered as she heard her sister talk to Jesus about her.

So, what is the message in this little story of Mary, Martha and Jesus?

Be present! That sounds easy – being present. I have found, however, that it has its own set of challenges. Being present can make us feel out of control. It can seem unproductive and maybe even unhelpful. Truly being present with another person can expose our flaws or our weaknesses – in ways that can usually be covered up when we stay active. We are called, then, to open ourselves up and to become vulnerable – vulnerable to others and vulnerable to God.

A number of years ago I was visiting a Bethel man whose wife had recently died after a long illness. This couple had been married for nearly 60 years and I first started visiting them a year or two before his wife got sick.

During the past few years - as his wife got progressively worse – I witnessed in this man the most incredible commitment that a husband could have and could convey to his wife. He was there for her each and every step of the way as she became increasingly sick. It was a kind of commitment that was tender, amazing, heartbreaking and beautiful all at the same time.

I shared with him during our visit that I was so touched by the commitment that he had for his wife throughout her illness. He said to me, “Pastor, I guess that’s what for better or for worse is all about.” He’s right.

That kind of commitment – that kind of incredible presence – would not have been possible without first becoming vulnerable. The love that this couple shared throughout their life together allowed for a presence between them that was lasting and powerful. At the end it was not what he did or even said that really made a difference to his wife, it was simply that he was there.

That is why Mary was where she was – at the feet of Jesus. She could not think of any better place to be. And she was right. Christ is present here, now, and as we move out from here. Now it is up to us to show the world what that means. Amen.