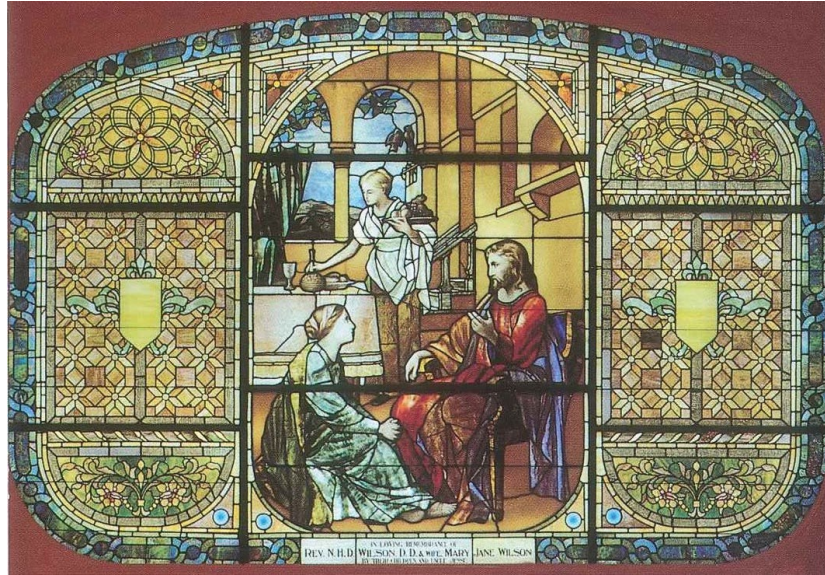


Women Coming to Jesus: The Sisters Come
Text

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Since I was 28 ... and yes, that was a quite a while ago, I've had no real choice about what I was going to do on a Sunday morning. Unless I was on vacation (Never missed a Sunday due to illness.) Unless I was on vacation or a mission trip, and sometimes even then I would get up to preach. And then came retirement. Now what do I do on Sundays? Well, I'm still preaching some --- filling in for pastors who need to be gone. But most Sundays, I go worship where a woman will be preaching. You see, as close as we all are and as much as we want to support each other in ministry, we active pastors rarely get to hear one another preach. Now I can. Last Sunday I was in Wadesboro with Rev. Stacy Lundy. On Easter I managed to go to two churches To be with Elizabeth Coppedge-Henley in Pineville and then jump over to Gastonia to be with Sally Queen. But a few months ago, I needed to be in Greensboro on a Sunday afternoon so I decided to go early and worship with Beth Crissman and the good people at West Market Street. And there I saw this.

ON SCREEN



INTRO TO SERMON

Mary and Martha --- these are the insiders. Earlier today we spent time with the Outsiders. Tonight, the Insiders. John tells us in chapter 11 that quote *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus*. They are never mentioned in any list of disciples. They are not part of the family. They are for Jesus those incredibly wonderful blessings in life --- They are friends. And they too Are Women Coming to Jesus. This evening we take a closer look at what happens when the Sisters Come to Jesus.

MARY

And we begin with Mary. Hers is an absolutely beautiful story. Mary is really special. Most of the people who come to Jesus --- including the women --- come to get something. Mary of Bethany comes to give something. And you know friends, that's something we can do too. We can come to Jesus to give rather than just receive. We meet Mary of Bethany three times in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Luke,

frustrating her sister, she sits listening --- *at the feet of Jesus*. In the 11th chapter of John, mourning the death of her brother --- she falls crying --- *at the feet of Jesus*. And then in John chapter 12, comforting her master and friend, she presents a special gift --- *at the feet of Jesus*. Three times we meet this Mary and always, she is *at the feet of Jesus*.

ON SCREEN

Luke 10:38-39 **38** Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. **39** She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

We will pick up there when we talk about Martha but for now, I want you to notice that there is no mention of brother Lazarus. Martha, as the one who receives Jesus into the home, is portrayed as head of the household. We hardly even pause to notice that today but we should not miss the radical nature of what is happening here --- a Rabbi coming into a woman's home. And the next verse points to even more radical behavior. Sister Mary sitting at the feet of that Rabbi. What's so radical about that? "To sit at a Rabbi's feet" was a euphemism used to describe a person as a disciple of that Rabbi. Now, can you see how radical this story and these relationships are? Jesus is received by a woman --- Martha---- and then receives a woman --- Mary. I for one have always appreciated Mary. She was my precedent for not having to stop reading and studying to ---- do the dishes. Now for the second story.

LAZARUS' DEATH

We read about the death of Lazarus in John, Chapter 11. The sisters send for Jesus when their brother is ill. But he does not drop everything and come running. He delays and Lazarus dies. As the story continues, we discover that when Jesus does arrive, Martha rushes out to meet him but Mary stays home. Now there is disagreement among biblical scholars as to when Mary knew about Jesus' arrival. Some believe she heard about it when Martha did but just chose to stay in the house. Seems to me those guys just don't know our Mary. Realizing that her friend Jesus was near, Mary would not, could not stay away. Besides, knowing Martha, she probably wanted a little time with Jesus alone. She did, you know, have a bit of a bone to pick with him --- about not coming earlier --- and I suspect she preferred to do that before Mary showed up, fell at his feet and got all his attention. And sure enough ... What happens when Mary does show up?

ON SCREEN

John 11:31-33 31 When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. **32** When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."**33** When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

LAZARUS' STORY

If the story from Luke is Martha's story, then this must be Lazarus' story. After all, he is the one raised from the dead. But in this story all

three members of that household are discovering the power of new life. Lazarus with his grave clothes flapping in the wind. Martha in her theological discussion with Jesus. And Mary, who dares to share her grief, who unashamedly comes to Jesus and lays her grief without apology at the feet of her Lord.

In these stories, Mary is very much the passive character, present, yet in the shadows of her brother and sister. But, friends, she will not remain there. Mary listens to Jesus, grieves with Jesus, rejoices with Jesus, all from the shadows. But Jesus will not leave her there. --- Little by little Jesus gently pulls Mary out of those shadows so that she might offer him a very special gift --- one he needs to receive and one she needs to give.

ON SCREEN

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2** Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. **3** Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, **5** "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." **6** He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. **8** You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Now this is Mary's story. I've always liked this story but for years, I failed to really appreciate one particular line. **And the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.** Now that's an eyewitness account for sure. Think for a moment about times when you've been stopped in your tracks by an unexpected fragrance. The smell of a just cut Christmas tree. Bread baking in an oven. A loved one's perfume. The NC mountains just before the rain. Now imagine what it might have been like to be in the room when that fragrance of Mary's ointment burst forth from its container, encircled the kneeling Mary rose to envelope Jesus and finally filled the whole house. I don't know about you but I, well, I want to be there. I want to smell the fragrance. This is Mary's story. It belongs to Mary of Bethany and --- to all of us --- those who remember. Oh, Lazarus and Martha are present, but now they are the ones who recede into the shadows when Mary – quiet, passive, listening Mary --- finally acts, comes to Jesus and offers her gift.

SPONTANEOUS

Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet is, I believe, a spontaneous gift. Had it been planned; I don't believe Mary would have risked the embarrassment. Had Martha suspected, she surely would have stopped her sister from such inappropriate behavior. Reputable women never loosened their hair in public. Such loosened hair on a slave was used by masters to wipe their dirty hands. And if Mary was determined to come, determined to make such an extravagant and expensive gesture, then she

should have anointed Jesus' head of course. That was the proper action. You see, only the feet of the dead were dressed with ointment. Yes, I believe that Mary's act was, a spontaneous act, a spontaneous gift of love. And it was Mary's act, hers alone. Lazarus sat. Martha served. But Mary --- Mary filled the house with fragrance.

And the result of such a simple gift?

- Mary was criticized viciously by Judas
- Defended lovingly by Jesus
- And now remembered by all

Most acts of love are simple acts and often spontaneous, arising from the heart in response to a given moment. Such giving is, I believe, the work of the Spirit.

The author John tells us this happens 6 days before the Passover. Jesus will soon be killed. Mary cannot understand all that her friend is facing and feeling; none of the followers could. But --- as is often the case with those who love us best ---- Mary feels his pain, the anxiety, the loneliness. And in an act of the heart, with a gift of love, Mary rushes forth to assure Jesus that he is not alone. It is that act that fills the house with fragrance. Mary cannot protect Jesus from death and she cannot share the cross. In fact, this gift, remembered for generations, changed absolutely none of the circumstances at all. But Mary does what she can. She comes to Jesus, not to get but ---- to give.

And friends, Jesus himself told us we could do the same thing. Jesus told us that when we cared for others in their time of need --- hungry, sick, hurting in any way, we would be caring for him. Don't you see ... We come to Jesus to give ---- by giving to others in need. And when we do ... we may actually disturb those around us ...but whether others notice or not ... we will, like sister Mary, once again fill the space with holy fragrance. It is of course our choice. But we can choose to come to Jesus to give.

MARTHA

And now Martha. Picking up on the story where Jesus visits ...

ON SCREEN

Luke 10:40-42 ⁴⁰ 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." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing.⁰ Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Now, there is something very endearing about this text. Jesus is spending time with his friends. Jesus is sharing a meal with loved ones. Isn't that one of the great pleasures in life? To share a table with friends. When Cecil was in seminary and I was working in the Dental School Library, we often shared our evening meals with another couple. We'd just combine what we had. Nothing fancy, nothing special but looking back on it now ... I realize just how wonderful it really wasPlain but good food. Plain but good conversation. Dinner at a friend's table. It's

one of the great pleasures of life. And that's what is happening here.
Jesus is sharing a table with his friends.

MARTHA

Now, let me say right off the bat that I do not intend to spend our time together criticizing Martha. I like Martha -- for many reasons. Martha speaks her mind. I like that. Martha puts the food on the table. I really like that. Martha makes things happen. She's a person of action. I like Martha. She even reminds me a little of --- myself. And truth be told, I'll bet she reminds you a little of you too or of someone you know and love. No, we're not going to criticize Martha. Instead, we are going to use Martha and her circumstances to help us take a look at ourselves.

And here's why. Martha does to Jesus, what so many of us do. Martha wants him to be there -- invites him into her life -- but when he arrives, something gets in the way. Something prevents Martha from giving Jesus the full attention that he deserves and even demands IF he is going to bless her like he longs to bless her. But why does that happen? What prevents Martha from giving Jesus the kind of attention he desires? If we can figure that out, maybe we can learn something about what gets in the way when Jesus tries to bless us too.

CUMBERED

Let's take a closer look. Our clue to understanding Martha is found in verse 40.

ON SCREEN

But Martha was distracted by her many tasks.

That, folks, is the problem. Martha is distracted. It's a good translation but you'll find in other versions a more old-fashioned word --- *cumbered*. Some of you will remember the old hymn ... *Are you weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care, precious savior still our refuge; take it to the Lord in prayer*. Martha was cumbered ... burdened, distracted. She couldn't give Jesus the full attention he wanted because of those distractions. Cumbered with a load of care, Martha could not receive Jesus as her refuge. Could we have the same problem?

LOST HER FOCUS

When I was an 18-year-old camp counselor at church camp, I was known among the counselors for one special talent. We all did a lot of work with wood, carving rings, making wooden nametags, fashioning walking sticks. I wasn't all that good with a knife but I could really burn wood. I mean, burn things into wood with a magnifying glass. I just had a knack for it. I'd hold that little piece of round glass at just the right angle to catch the sun, and then I'd move it up or down until the pinpoint of light was just the right size, and then I'd hold it steady, steady, steady until the wood began to burn and the smoke would rise. Then, ever so slowly, I'd move that little pinpoint to form the design we wanted. Here's a sample of my work:

ON SCREEN



I burned in sunrises, names, crosses, ... all kinds of things. If you could draw it, I could burn it. All I needed was focus. That was the problem others had, you see. They couldn't focus that ray of sunlight into the tiny little dot needed to burn the wood. And even if they did catch it for a moment, they quickly lost it They lost their focus. And thus, they lost their power. It's an easy thing to do. And it's exactly what happened to Martha. She was distracted. She had lost her focus. And Jesus knew she was in danger of losing her power. But here's the good news. Martha came to Jesus --- and she found her focus and her power. We can do the same.

WORK REPLACES WORSHIP

But first we have to identify those things that cause us to lose our focus... to take our eyes off the burning dot of light. We have to know what distracts us. Now, Martha's distraction, at first glance, seems quite noble. Yes, Mary is sitting devotedly at his feet, *enjoying* Jesus'

company but Martha is preparing to *serve* Jesus. Isn't that work important? Of course it is. But the problem is that Martha can't be satisfied with what is already done so that she can now stop and enjoy her guest. The language used when Martha says ... *my sister has left me to do all the work* --- implies that Mary has been working with Martha but has now stopped her work to sit with Jesus for a while. Martha can't quite do that.

Haven't you ever felt that way at --- say, Christmas? We can become so absorbed with holiday gatherings, making sure the decorations and food are just perfect that we lose sight of the real reason for it all. We are cumbered, distracted and we lose our focus. We scurry, we hurry and we worry and when it's all over, we realize we've hardly even had time for a conversation with those we invited to the table. And then, the chance is gone.

The same thing happens to me when I make my work more important than my worship. Through the years, I have used the early morning hours for my prayer and bible reading. It's my favorite time of the day but quite often, other things --- important things get in the way. Early morning trips to the gym, needs at home, this or that task that simply can't wait any longer A sermon to be written. An email to be answered. Anyway, if I'm not careful I let my work replace my worship. At first glance, it seems very noble, but a few weeks of that, and I begin to wonder: "*Why is everything I do so hard? Why do I feel so*

burdened? ” And it hits me like a splash of cold water on a hot summer’s day. I’ve let my work replace my worship.

Friends, it is just this simple, no matter how noble or important the work we *can* do, it can never replace the worship we *must* do. Many faithful Christians make that mistake. They busy themselves doing things *for* Jesus but they don’t take time to be *with* Jesus To worship. And eventually they burn out or burn up or they just kind of fizzle. Worship and work are meant to complement each other not replace each other. Martha was distracted by the work she felt called to do. In her case, even *servicing* Jesus at the table got in the way of her *receiving* Jesus at the table. Could you and I be making the same mistake? Well, good news. And Martha did find her focus. She came to Jesus. We can too.

MARTHA’S STATEMENT OF FAITH

How do I know that? How do I know Martha found the right focus? Well, it’s true I’m reading a bit between the lines but I think I’m right here. Let’s turn again to John 11 – to Martha’s part of the story. I suspect Martha is a bit perturbed that Jesus has not come sooner. She goes out to meet him and says *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* Their conversation continues in John 11: 25-27.

ON SCREEN

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.⁽⁶⁾ Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,⁽⁶⁾ the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Do you see what I mean about Martha finding her focus? Even with all that is happening around her ... her brother's death, her sister's mourning, guests everywhere, her disappointment with God, even in the grip of grief, Martha still has her focus. She doesn't hesitate ... her declaration of faith is full and immediate. *Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.* With all kinds of distractions around her, Martha is still focused on Jesus.

Now folks, let me pause here for just a moment and emphasize the importance of this statement from Martha. She is one of only two people in all the gospels that declare Jesus to be the Messiah to his face. The other is Peter in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. They all tell the story of Jesus asking the disciples: *"Who do you say that I am?"* and Peter replying. *"You are the Messiah, the son of the living God."* It's the turning point of those Gospels. The same turning point in the Gospel of John happens here, when Martha makes this declaration. It's Good News. Martha came to Jesus and she found her focus and her power. We can too.

FOCUS IS ON OTHERS

But her work wasn't her only distraction. It wasn't the only thing that caused her to lose her focus. Martha is also distracted by what Mary is or is *not* doing. When her focus should have been on Jesus, she was distracted by others. It's a mistake we often make. We criticize what

others do or don't do for Jesus and use that to applaud or excuse our own behavior. It's something we all do. We admit that we have sinned but find comfort in the fact that we're not quite as sinful as someone else. Looking at others when we should be looking at Jesus is very distracting. It causes us to lose our focus. That's what happened to Martha. Could you be making the same mistake? Could I? Well, good news. Martha came to Jesus and found her focus and her power. We can too.

CONCLUSION

Oh friend. Are there distractions that are taking your focus off of Jesus? Has your good work left no time for good worship? Has your attention drifted away from Jesus? Do you spend too much time focused on what others do and don't do? Well good news, Beloved. Jesus called Martha's name. And Jesus is calling your name too. Stop ... Listen. Can you hear it? *Child, my child, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.* Martha heard her name and found her focus--- and thus, her power. She came to Jesus and discovered the power that can only be found there. In this time apart, as Women Coming to Jesus, I'm hoping you and I can slow down long enough to hear Jesus call our names ---- and do the same. *In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen*