

May 14, 2023

God is at Work When We Worship and Serve

Luke 10:38-42; John 12:1-11

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This Mother's Day, Kevin, Bill and I are starting a 3 week series on God is at Work When... In the month since we celebrated Mark and Sue's retirement—and even in the days after Mark announced his retirement, we have been cognizant of the Spirit of God at work in our midst. This is that hopeful expectation that Paul speaks about in Romans 15:13—May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So where is it that we are witnesses of God's work—here at Redland, in our homes, at our work or school? This morning we are going to look at a family—2 sisters and a brother—to see how God was at work in their lives—Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Luke 10. I also have a sister and a brother and I felt the Holy Spirit draw me towards this passage this Mother's Day weekend because of what it can teach us about Jesus and how He sees his children. And in honor of God's words and for the power it has to transform lives, if you are able, please stand as we read Luke 10: 38-42.

Luke 10:38-42 (NIV)

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

This is not the first mention of women who were disciples of Jesus. Earlier in Luke 8, we see that several women are part of the entourage.

Luke 8:1-3

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³ Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Many of us, including me, have sometimes been taught that Jesus had only male disciples. This is not what the Bible teaches at all. It has been a convenient crutch by some to exclude 50% of the population from opportunities to obediently follow Christ. Now in Luke 10, we see Jesus and two of his female disciples.

Jesus transcended the prejudices of his day.

Martha is named as the homeowner and is acting as the hostess. Mary acts as his disciple from the beginning by sitting at His feet. This was very unusual in first-century Judaism. Now it was the language "sitting at His feet" that was used to identify male disciples of Rabbis, but it was against the cultural norms for men and women to interact socially as a Rabbi and his disciples would. But Jesus accepted Mary as one of His disciples without discussion. It was the norm for Jesus.

Martha had extended the invitation to Jesus and His disciples and continued with her culturally expected tasks—ensuring that the men could worship. She had no other expectation—but when her sister, Mary, decided to learn and worship at Jesus' feet, Martha was more than annoyed. The idea of joining Jesus never occurred to Martha. She was

showing her love and devotion to Jesus by giving Him hospitality, her best and she thought, only acceptable gift. In Martha's eagerness to serve her Messiah, she almost missed the opportunity to become His disciple.

It is not a binary choice, worship or serve—it is a “choose all of the correct answers” choice—or even more accurately, rank the answers in order of importance. Martha invited Jesus into her home and then kept herself so busy she could not even stop to find time to worship Him. She could only resent her sister's worship of Him.

*“What we do **WITH** Christ is far more important than what we do **FOR** Christ.” Warren Wiersbe*

It is easy for someone with one personality style to look down on someone with an opposite personality style but there is no one perfect style. God made each of us unique with our own strengths and our own weaknesses.

Martha is burdened by the societal expectations—the Jewish legal and religious expectations of how women should offer hospitality in the home and the limits of formal discipleship of women by a rabbi. Jesus changed these expectation and requirements. In Luke 11:46, we read: ***Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.***

Jesus promises a different and lighter burden in Matthew 11:28-30 ²⁸ ***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”***

The Yoke is a rabbi's teaching—his perspective on the scripture—on the word of God. Taking the *yoke of the rabbi* reflected a disciple's willing submission and adherence to his chosen rabbi's interpretation and application of the Scriptures. Disciples would attach themselves to a Rabbi, following close, listening and learning. The Rabbi would teach the disciple their interpretation and application of the scriptures. When Jesus speaks of His yoke, He is speaking about the grace and mercy he brings to the world—it is not a burden as the current Jewish ritual and legal, spiritual requirements were. Jesus offers rest to the weary—those weary of the heavy loads that the Pharisees required. Jesus' yoke is a metaphor for becoming a disciple.

And in Martha's living room, Jesus changed everything about the expected role of women. ***“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*** Generations of chauvinism, bias, tradition and ritual were upended. Women were invited to be disciples, in the presence of the Holy of Holies, no longer on the outside looking in.

Paul understood this just a few decades later when he writes to the Galatians in chapter 3 ²⁷ ***for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. And Paul continues later in Galatians to not take on the yoke of slavery again in 5:1 “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”***

In this story of Mary and Martha, Jesus takes away the distinctions of which genders can worship freely and be discipled and what spiritual service or work is gender specific. He flattens the gender hierarchy. Culture, then and now, holds onto it because, sometimes it can be easier or safer to compartmentalize gender roles. It offers security to some. But we must go back to the biblical text—Jesus said few things are needed or indeed only one. To be disciples of the Rabbi Jesus—in order to make disciples.

When we limit how women and girls can serve, we deny the freedom Christ has given us because of who He is—not who we are. We should not deny the truth that Jesus had women disciples, which was revolutionary for the time. It should not be revolutionary today but it is in some Christian circles. And the disciples Jesus had were studying at his feet to become the first generation of Christian rabbis (or pastors), male and female.

Let's look again at Luke 8:1-3 ***“After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him,² and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out;³ Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.”*** They were the pastoral interns in the Jesus Seminary of Life. Jesus had called all of them to serve.

Earlier in Luke 10, we hear the Parable of the **Good Samaritan**. Jesus has just finished teaching the crowd and his disciples the importance of loving God and their neighbor, even if it means going against the cultural norms of the day. The passage just after this is Jesus' teaching on **The Lord's Prayer** in Luke 11. The Good Samaritan challenges us about our relationship with people. The Lord's Prayer deals with our relationship with God. The one before on how to serve and the one after on how to pray. The one before shows how to break down cultural divides and the one after helps us understand how worship and prayer bridges the chasm between us and God.

As I was studying and reading to prepare for this sermon, I gleaned many spiritual truths but this quote from The Bible Expositor's Commentary was foundational: *“A knowledge of the social world of Mediterranean societies helps in highlighting the striking act of Jesus in his call to women to follow him. ‘Martha and Mary are known only in terms of the interior of their house, where Jesus is their guest. The expected place of Mary, moreover, is with Martha in the women's part of that household, the kitchen; she is not expected in the dining area, and so her presence there requires a special explanation. Jesus' remark to Martha serves to vindicate Mary's exceptional presence in space not expected of her; the story consciously upsets the native perception of how things ought to be.’”* (Malina and Neyrey, *“Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts in The Social World of Luke-Acts”*)

Wherever we find Mary of Bethany in the Gospels (and she is mentioned three different times), she is always at the feet of Jesus. Here in Luke 10, later when her brother Lazarus has died and she is grieving in John 11, and then when she anoints Jesus before He enters Jerusalem in John 12.

Mary is always worshipping. And Jesus tells Martha that she needs to worship as well—it is the one thing that is needed. Without worshipping Jesus before serving, we will all end up busy but not blessed. Too often we give a gift we think someone needs without considering the gift they desire. That day when Jesus arrived at Martha's home, he was ready for a quiet visit, away from the demanding crowds. He needed an oasis among friends. Martha was eager to serve but in the way she thought best, not what Jesus desired.

When we volunteer to do something that God has not called us to, we miss out on what He might be about to call us to do, or we keep that opportunity from the person who is called to do it. Don't jump in at the first mention of something.

Wait on God.

Isaiah 30:21 ***Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”***

Work is important.

But service was never supposed to be our first priority. Intimacy with God—that being still in his presence is the priority. We all need that—no matter our personality style. Mary may have instinctively known to seek it, but Martha needed it just as much as Mary did. For some of us, it might be hard to believe that Jesus really wants to know us. We don't think we are worthy of that intimacy but that is why Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross. Don't diminish the value of that sacrifice by not participating in the benefits. Ephesians 2:4-5 ***“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.***

We are called to serve, to love—that identifies us as Christians. Martha's actions are not what Jesus rebukes. Jesus rebukes her attitude—she had let her responsibilities become irritants—to the point of agitation.

Serving without worship is exhausting and worship without serving is selfish.

This serving and worship collaboration is sanctification, becoming conformed to the image of Christ. Brother Lawrence said *“Sanctification does not depend upon changing our works, but in doing that for God’s sake which we commonly do for our own.”*

Checking Your Motives: Here is a series of questions that can help us do the work of Christ with the heart of Christ. Remember, this is not a checklist of things you should do but a few questions to examine your attitudes—so you know what you need to talk over with Jesus when you and He are communing together.

- Am I serving to **impress** anyone?
- Am I serving to receive external **rewards**?
- Is my service affected by **moods** and personal **preferences**?
- Am I using this **service** to feel good about myself?
- Am I using my service to **ignore** God’s voice?

C.S. Lewis describes our service this way: *“He seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye.”*

As we begin to establish and develop that intimacy with Christ, we can begin to see the work Christ has called us do: Ephesians 2:10 *“¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* Why does Jesus need to spend quality time with us, that resting for our weariness? He wants relationship...He wants that give and take. We read in Isaiah 28: 11b-13 *“God will speak to this people, ¹² to whom he said, “This is the resting place, let the weary rest”; and, “This is the place of repose”—but they would not listen. ¹³ So then, the word of the LORD to them will become: Do this, do that, a rule for this, a rule for that; a little here, a little there—so that as they go they will fall backward; they will be injured and snared and captured.”*

We should not want to go back to a tyranny of works—which is a burden too heavy to carry. God’s grace is so much better.

PRAYER + the WORD + TIME = INTIMACY with GOD

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. Psalm 42:1

Martha thought she had value because of what she did. Jesus wanted her to know she was valuable simply because she was His.

Because of her later interactions with Jesus, we can assume Martha accepted Jesus’ invitation to worship and become a disciple. That is the most logical explanation for Martha’s transformation in John 11 and 12. Let’s look briefly at John 11 and then park awhile in John 12.

John 11:17-32

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 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."

How is Martha different in this story—well, to begin with, she leaves a house full of guests to hurry and meet Jesus in verse 20. And then Martha demonstrates her faith in Jesus by telling Him that she knows He can fix the situation. She has been waiting for Him to come. Jesus briefly questions her and then she gives what scholars call one of the most incredible statements of faith: **"I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."**

Then Martha goes and gets her sister, Mary with no hint of the earlier sibling rivalry and jealousy. She tells Mary the Teacher has arrived and is asking for her.... even though in this culture the Rabbi Teachers didn't teach women—but Jesus did. He taught to all who would receive Him—women as well as men.

What did the disciples, Mary and Martha, discover about Jesus when Lazarus died?

- God always has a **plan** but we may not understand it.
- Jesus' **love** will be enough.

John 12 takes place several weeks after the raising of Lazarus. Jesus had gone into hiding and he returns to Bethany.

John 12:1-11

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."

⁹ Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹¹ for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

Martha is serving and Mary is worshipping but it is different in John 12 than it was in Luke 10. Martha has an attentive heart and is present where Jesus is rather than being resentful making preparations away from the gathering. She serves

with joy because she has learned to worship Jesus and wants to be where He is. Mary starts out probably by sitting at his feet and listening but then she is also serving by anointing Jesus. She is commended by Jesus for performing this act of service.

Both women are changed by their encounters with Jesus. Have you allowed yourself to be changed by encountering Jesus. He wants to be in a relationship with us. We don't have to do anything to earn it. He takes us with our faults and our selfish attitudes and tells us Martha, Martha, Peggy, Peggy: you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Today, Jesus is waiting for you to receive Him and sit at His feet. Or perhaps, you know that you need to be in community with other believers who can help you worship and serve Jesus together. Jesus is waiting for you as well.

Amen.