

## **The Rev. Billy Cerveney:**

Thank you for your gospels, thank you that we get to gather together today and we get to be reminded of the larger story, Lord, that we get to remind, be reminded of the story that you are writing that we are a part of, Lord. Tune our hearts to your grace, give us ears to hear and eyes to see in your name, Jesus, amen. We are now in this portion of the lectionary, we've got, we're in this, the book of Luke a lot, and last week we talked about the Good Samaritan, and this week we get to talk about the story we just read about Mary and Martha. The book of Luke is unique. I love it. I love the way he writes because he kind of writes like an investigative reporter. The way he wrote, Luke wrote the gospel of Luke, but he also wrote the book of Acts, and what he did is he interviewed all these people, and it's got these really distinct characteristics of it. The book of Luke is where you find all the greatest hits of the parables, right, where you find the prodigal son and, like we said, the Good Samaritan, things like this, and today, what we just read is we meet the two lady bosses in the Bible, we meet Mary and Martha. We come into our our passage in verse 28, it says, "As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home." It doesn't, in this passage, doesn't tell us where he is, but we know Mary and Martha are from Bethany, so they're walking, that's where he's walking into that village, and as soon as they step in, here comes Martha doing what Martha does. The scripture says she welcomes him, but the Greek, the way it's written, it doesn't mean that she just opened the door and was like, "Hey, Jesus, welcome." It's almost like she's, it's this active verb, which she's like a tractor beam of hospitality. She's reaching out and pulling Jesus in, and it continues, it says she has 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 or services.

And it's just as intentional as Martha was at doing her job and preparing the meal and serving Mary as equally as intentional sitting at his feet and the way the scripture describes it, it said that she was distracted and that word's really dense and what it means here is that her mind was kind of being pulled apart mentally, that she was being pulled simultaneously in all these directions at the same time that she was a bit frantic and there was a lack of peace inside of her. So, Martha, when she's doing this, you can imagine you have compassion for Martha. We've all been in a Martha situation before. Martha is chapped. She's sitting there watching her sister on the floor while she's probably sweating, you know, schlepping plates, and she goes to Jesus and she says, "Lord, do you not care what's happening here? Do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me." So she's not just tired, she is annoyed and for a lot of reasons because she's in this cultural moment of that time when you have a house guest, it is an all-female-hands-on-deck kind of moment and for her to not be part of that preparation and to be sitting at the feet of the rabbi at that moment while she's working is unusual. Not only that, the irony of this situation is that she's upset with Mary, but she doesn't go to Mary. Where does she go? She goes to tattle tales with to Jesus.

She's like, "Don't you tell her to do the right thing?"

And what's the Lord say? The Lord answers her, he says, "Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her." I'd be honest here, that seems a little dismissive, right? I mean, Mary really is, you know, busting it here, and she's opened up her door without Martha.

I'm sorry, Martha is really busting here. Without Martha, this event wouldn't be happening is in Jesus when he comes. It's not just Jesus; he has an entourage. So I have a little compassion here, and Martha's just being honest. So why do you think Jesus is challenging her in this moment? Because what Jesus sees, what we don't. And Jesus sees our heart postures; he sees these spiritual conditions that we don't always see. While he might have compassion for a while, we feel a certain way, which he always does. He's not going to leave it alone, right? And what Jesus is saying in that moment, he's rebuking her for something that's true of her, which is so often true of us. What he's saying here is he's saying, "You are so absorbed with your service of me that you are missing me altogether. You're so consumed with what you think I'm commanding you to do that you have lost sight of me, who's sitting here right in front of you, my presence."

Is that true? Can you be so too absorbed with serving Jesus? So I thought that's kind of the point, right? Aren't we called to serve Jesus? What does it mean to be too absorbed with that?

Let me give you an example, and I'll explain what I think Jesus is getting at here. I'll tell you a little story. Something you might not know about me is I am the international global show and tell champion of all time. No question. Let me give you a little backstory here. I grew up in the late 70s and early 80s. If you didn't grow up during that time, you might have heard of this television show, but you might not have lived it. But if you're my age, or at least within the blast radius of my age, you will appreciate what I'm about to say, The Brady Bunch. Did everyone see The Brady Bunch? If you have not grown up watching The Brady Bunch, The Brady Bunch was the iconic post-school sitcom show that ever was. We lived in a three-channel universe. If you come from my era, I could tell you every episode, I could tell you every character, I could tell you what they did because it was just part of our cultural sort of collective memory. There was this one character on The Brady Bunch, and her name was Alice. You guys remember Alice? What did Alice do? She was the housekeeper, right? And Alice she always wore this blue apron. She had a beehive hairdo, and she'd run around and she was like the wacky housekeeper that would get involved with the family trips and be on the antics and whatever and all that kind of stuff. So well, the thing about Alice was her real name was Ann B. Davis and Ann B. Davis lived in California and she was a Christian and she was not only a Christian, she was an Episcopalian and she was really good friends with the Bishop of California and she was coming to Jacksonville to do a conference and the Bishop of California called my father who was at the time the Bishop of Florida and said, "Ann B. Davis is coming to town. She needs a place to stay. Guess where she came? My house." So you can imagine, I'm in third grade, eight or nine years old. This is peak Brady Bunch years, right? I come home from school. I walk into my living room, and there was Alice sitting on my couch. It was like the Matrix, like my reality bent. I'm like, "How is this humanly possible?" There is Alice, and it was unbelievable, but it was also weird because she didn't have on her apron, and she didn't have her hair wasn't in this like beehive hairdo. She wasn't doing like making a pie or getting involved in some. She was actually pretty, pretty calm, and she was very kind and very nice, and I don't remember what we talked about, but I do remember this saying, asking her, "Can I please take you to show and tell tomorrow?" To which she very kindly agreed across the street. So I remember we're sitting in my class at show and tell. Some kids up showing a Star Wars Lego. I'm like rocking back and forth in my seat. Waiting for Alice to arrive because I mean, come on, right? This is it. Game over. So all of a sudden, the door opens. I just stand up. I just face palm this kid. I don't even remember. Sit down. I'm like, "Ladies and gentlemen of the second grade, Alice." And in walks Alice. I'll tell you what, you will never, ever see something equivalent to the looks of probably 18 to 20

third grade people having their minds blown completely out of the back of their skull watching this iconic figure walk in. So she sits down and her, and again, she's a believer. So she uses her platform, which is wonderful. She was very kind, sweet lady, to try and teach people about Jesus. She begins to sit down and she wanted to tell us about Jesus. She wanted to talk about faith. She wanted to talk about service. She wanted to talk about what mattered in life, but guess what? We wanted none of that. She wanted to talk about A.N.B. Davis' experience. We didn't care about A.N.B. Davis. We wanted to talk about Alice. And she goes, "Well, you know, in my church I feel like that's great, but do you remember that time you went to the Grand Canyon? You remember that time you got lost in the prospector's jail? Remember when you found the tiki torch in Hawaii and your back threw out when you were doing the hula dance? Remember that time that you got, you know, etc. And she was very kind and gracious, but that was it. We would have none of it.

See what was going on there? See, we knew A.N.B. Davis, or at least we thought we did.

But the truth of the matter is we were so committed to this one-dimensional character that she was as a kid, and understandably, but we were so committed to this character that she played that we couldn't engage the real thing. I couldn't see it. Not only that, it was just too ingrained in what I was. I'll tell you this story because so often it's like that for us as Christians, and we do the same thing with Jesus. Here's what I mean. So maybe you grew up in the church, or maybe you came to faith later in life, who knows? But you have this profound encounter with Jesus, and you walk in and you begin to learn the contours of the Christian life. You begin to learn what it means to serve well, to love well, to be a part of the church, to care for the widows and orphans, and all the trappings of what Jesus calls us to. Or maybe you've had an encounter with Jesus, and he brought so much joy and peace in your life and all wonderful things.

But for everyone that journeys in Christianity long enough, like with Ann B. Davis, our love about the things of Jesus, it's so easy to lose sight of Jesus himself. It's very easy for Jesus to become this character, this biblical character, who dispenses wisdom and commands. And so we think in our life that we live according to this thing, this biblical character tells us to do. But what happens when we do that, when Jesus becomes a character, when Jesus becomes the dispenser of commands or the dispenser of feelings, what happens when we go there is it goes from being a relationship with a living God to us following a code. And when we flatten Jesus into a character and we begin to follow a code and we miss the Jesus, the living God that's right in front of us, functionally, we're doing Christianity without Christ. We do Christianity without Christ. Doesn't that sound silly? And when you try to do the Christianity without Christ, it becomes all about you, period. Am I serving him enough? Am I loving enough? Am I spiritual enough? Me, me, me, my identity, everything about my world becomes about what I do for Jesus rather than what he has done for me, what he's doing for me, what his promises for what he holds for me down the road. That is not grace. That is a picture of self-righteousness. And I have compassion for it. And we all do it in some capacity, but the problem of it is that it will twist you.

And the tyranny of this thing and the tyranny of thinking that way is that it's so hard to see, and it's so easy to miss because it looks so good from the outside. That I'm doing these things and I'm following this code, and this spiritual busyness has the trappings of healthy spiritual life.

You look at the story we just read, you notice something in our passage about Martha?

Nobody called her out. She was doing all that stuff. No one called her out. She told on her where she came out until she came and engaged Jesus, but they were fine. Oh, that's Martha just doing what she's doing because it looks just so normal. But it wasn't until she came to Jesus for letting Mary sit around and that's when she tipped her hand. And that's when Jesus rebuked her.

The problem is, it looks so great, but when we live that way, it's nothing more than spiritual rot that grows in the shadows of a disconnected heart. And we all have the capacity to do it.

Christianity without Christ, when we do that, it always becomes a burden. It becomes a burden because everything about what we are, everything about what I do, everything is at stake.

It's about me because I got to do X, Y, and Z. It determines my worth. I'm not just inviting you into my home. I'm proving something. Of course, no one would say that out loud. That's the subplot of our flesh that's telling us, yeah, you got to keep up with it. And I'm just as good as my next mistake. Christianity without Christ it becomes a burden. And Christianity without Christ eventually becomes a weapon. See what happens in those places, we feel the burden of what we need to do.

And inevitably, because it's just we're people, the tires slip, or I screw it up.

I do something wrong. I don't get it right. And rather than that being evidence of my humanity and that being evidence of my need and for me to cry out to Jesus like I need grace, I just see that as proof of my unworthiness. And when I get lost in that place, it becomes a place of shame. And in that place, rather than look at my own failures, guess what I do? I'll blame others.

What did Martha do? If Mary didn't just do that. Again, I got compassion for her, right? We blame others. So what's our solution? What does Jesus tell us to do? He says in our passage, it says in verse 41, Jesus calls us to presence over performance. Verse 41, "But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. But one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

What's our solution? Just choose the good portion, man. Just stop it. Just choose the good portion.

Sit at the feet of Jesus and be present. Okay, thanks. That's really helpful. That's really helpful. And I'm sure some of y'all can relate to this in this room that anyone who's ever trapped in the whirlpool of spiritual busyness knows just this one thing, is you just can't just turn it off. You can't turn it off. Even if I took you and I said, "No, you're done," and I strapped you to a chair, the busyness comes in all different forms. You can't shut your brain off, can you? That's when we wake up constantly at 5 a.m. with these constant comparisons.

That we're churning about the things that I should have done, that I didn't do, or the thing that I said that I shouldn't have said, or that thing that I did and I did it and I meant well, but it didn't go, but what if they saw it this way and my intention was questioned and da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da and we're in this kind of whirlpool, right? Just stop it. No. See, when you tell someone in that place to just go be present, two things happen. The first thing that happens there is you're just giving them another task that they can't live up to. And the second thing is you're just piling

shame on them. So here's the good news, though. See, the message of the gospel is not a call for you to be present with Jesus. It is the revelation that Jesus is present with you. Period.

Verse 28 of our passage, when the beginning of it, what does it say? It's easy to read over. "And Jesus entered the village. Jesus came to them, John 1, the word became flesh and dwelled with us." Yes.

John 19, "The Son of Man came to do what? To seek and save the laws." Hebrews 3 5, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Colossians 1, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Christ in you, the hope of glory. I could go for the next 20 minutes and read you verse after verse after verse about Jesus coming in and saying, "I am with you to the end of the age." Period. The distinction between my being present with Jesus and Jesus being present with me is major. Because my presence,

being present, that ain't my gift, man. I got about 10 minutes of presence. One of my favorite hymns, you ever read or listen to the hymn, "Come Thou Fount, come Thou Fount of every blessing to my heart to sing your grace?" In the middle of that song, it says, "Prown to wander. Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart, Lord. Take and seal it. Seal it for Thy courts above." Because I will run. I am not present. But Jesus, you are present with me. See, the power and the scandal of the gospel isn't that we can now run into the arms of Jesus and cling to Him, though you certainly can. The power and the scandal of the gospel is that Christ has run into your presence and is clinging to you. And He will never let you go. If you're in Jesus, if you are a Christian, if you believe in your heart and declare with your mouth, you are saved by faith and faith alone. What are you putting your faith in?

First and foremost, you are putting your faith in what John 15 says, "I didn't choose Him. He chose me. God is choosing me. When did God choose me?" Ephesians 1, "Before the foundations of the world."

Remember the part that says in the beginning when He said the earth was formless and void, the Spirit of God hovered over the water? Remember that part? Before that, that's when He chose you.

When God created the heavens and the earth, He chose me to receive the gift of faith and repentance so I could receive the Spirit of Christ that would wrap me up and never let me go.

What does that mean? It means if you are in Christ, you are not involved in some giant game of hide and seek where you're it and you're trying to find God. Christ, is it. And He's found you. And the game's over. And He's got you. And He's never letting go.

John 10, what do we say? I've said, I quote this so much. I love it. "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." You're not hanging on to Him. He's hanging on to you. So we got to believe this. We got to believe this. We got to grind this into our hearts. And what we just read in the prayer just a minute ago, like, "Lord, I know I can't even believe this apart from you. That's how incapable I am of presence. I can't even believe this, apart from you. Lord, have mercy. Give me grace because I can stand in the reality of Christ's presence. It is transformative." And two things happen. The first one is His presence. It kills my busyness. If I can sit and I can look and I'm aware that Jesus is already in front of me,

I don't have to focus on the X, Y, and Z that I have to do in order to get Jesus in front of me.

I can let it go. And the second thing is that it ignites my spiritual purpose.

When we rest in the presence of Jesus, that is not an invitation to being stagnant.

I can tell you this. I was a Christian for a lot of years before I began to get this.

And I burned myself out, and I was a lethargic person in terms of the way I loved or served. But when I began to get this, it lit a fire under me. It wasn't because I had to. It's because I wanted to. I began to see the realities of the gospel. I'm like, "This is true. Did you know this?"

I remember going to a pastor friend of mine when I began to hear these truths, and I remember sitting with him. I'm like, "Did you ever know this was true?" And he was laughing at me. He's like, "Yeah, man. This is in the Bible, and it lit a fire under me." We see it in our passage. Jesus, he's rebuking Martha, but he's not rebuking Martha because she's bad. He's inviting her back because she's burdened. And he's like, "You don't need to do, you can do this stuff, but you don't need to feel that way. We need to turn this around. We need Martha. Look what happened to Martha.

She goes through that with Jesus, and the next time we see her is in John 11. What does she do in John 11 when Lazarus dies? She's the first one out of the gate, and she falls at his feet.

She is coming to Jesus to pull him in, but she falls at his feet. What do we see her next? In John 12, she's serving again, but not a whiff of this stuff we're talking about here and there. God redeems her purpose. God renews her heart. He sets her in motion.

So let me ask you guys this, and we'll wrap it up here.

What are your gifts? How's God equipped each of you? And you've all got them, right? You've all got them. How has God gifted you uniquely?

How does that gift exhaust you a little bit?

And let me ask you this. What would happen if you began a practice of sitting in the presence of a Jesus who has come to you that will never let you go, that says, "You see that thing you have? You see that gift you have? I gave that to you." It's not an accident. It's on purpose, and it is capable of things that you have no idea, but you don't need to use this to earn my favor.

You don't need to do this to earn your place in the church or try to be something that you're not. You are already that thing. You're my beloved. I am with you, and I'll never let you go. What would happen? What would happen to our church? That would be a fun thing to see, wouldn't it? I challenge you all, and I'll challenge myself. Let's pray about that. What does it mean for us as a community to gather around that truth, to warm our hands around that idea that Jesus is with me? I don't need to find him. He is finding me. He has found me, and he has equipped me. And in his presence, he is calling me to something that I can't even prepare my mind for.

Amen? Amen.