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Redeeming Martha
Luke 10:38-42, John 11:1-46

You really have to be careful what you name a child; they may live up to the name. My parents named me Martha and I've been living up to...or living down the name ever since. Most people have heard the story Luke told about Martha and that's what they remember about the biblical Martha. That's the story of the time Jesus stayed at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus and brought with him his whole entourage which would have been at least 12 men, but probably was closer to 30 people, men and women. People sat around listening to Jesus teach and at some point Martha began to prepare the meal but her sister Mary didn't go to help with the hostess duties. She stayed at the feet of Jesus. Martha got frustrated and asked Jesus to intervene. Jesus' replied, Martha, Martha, you are worried about so many things. Mary has chosen the better part.

People project that image of Martha onto me, and other Martha's, and we are considered at once to be the hero...a good hard worker, and yet the villain. Christians, who don't even know me, feel free to advise me on the merits of taking quiet time to sit at the feet of Jesus, to not worry so much about the details and enjoy the presence of the Lord. **(Reflect on the images, particularly stained glass, on line available.)** From this I've learned several things:

1. Taking time to sit with Jesus is something special, too important to miss, and learning this probably launched me into getting my D. Min. in spirituality. (Explain Spiritual Direction.)
2. The meal preparation story got my attention and as I studied it in depth I was able to get past the correcting of Martha to realize that this story is crucial for identifying Jesus' acceptance of women as disciples. Jesus' calling Martha to sit down and listen was a call to live beyond housework, and to live as a peer among men. In those days usually rabbis would not teach the women. Martha was essentially being called to enter seminary. It was not setting up Mary as a model because she was a passive, quiet learner, but because she did not let housework keep her from taking her place among the men and using the intellect God had given her for personal growth.

3. Jesus also wasn't criticizing Martha for preparing the meal, and filling the traditional women's role. Hospitality was a strong component of the social code at the time and later it is written in Paul's letters that hospitality is also a gift of the Holy Spirit. Welcoming others into our homes, sharing our food with them is an important way of sharing the good news of the nature of the kingdom of God. What Jesus was criticizing was that Martha was going to such lengths that her desire to fix a huge fancy meal that the preparations would take another woman out of the rare opportunity to learn. After all Jesus was content with a simple fare. Give Jesus a few fish and loaves of bread and he could make a feast for thousands. Martha could have welcomed Jesus to come on in and asked him, "Do you want me to fix dinner or will you?" Jesus had taught that he himself is the bread of life who can provide not only the basics for our family, but also for whatever ministry he calls us into. Jesus was calling Martha to look for the miracle.

When Larry and I were called to the church planting position in Chino Hills, we knew the salary was not enough to live on and there were no people to do the hard work of planting. The ministry would take both of our efforts. It would have to happen in our home because there was no office for Bible studies, choir practice, planning meetings or even worship at the beginning. Besides, the children were still young, and one of us could not be out working a second job for the family income. I worried about how we would meet our budget and do all this, but God provided in amazing ways. You all here at West Valley gave us an office shower and monthly mission support. You were the unexpected miracle and we still appreciate that support.

4. So Jesus critique of Martha was actually a positive call to take her place among the men, to live simply, relying on God's provision and finally to know that God cares about her personally. You see when Martha was working too hard, her reply to Jesus was essentially... "Lord, don't you care...." Have you ever felt like that? When parents are working too hard children begin to feel that way. "Dad's at the office again late. Mom's on the phone all the time. Don't they care about me?" Church volunteers who

carry too much of the load start to feel that way when they get tired and no one else will help, “Lord don’t you care...?” Sometimes we are carrying too much of a load because we haven’t learned to set healthy boundaries. It’s hard in ministry, but Jesus is saying to Martha...I love you. I’ll provide for you. Let’s set some healthy boundaries.

And Jesus redeems us, as he did Martha with unconditional love. He not only respected her and appreciated her. Jesus loved Martha. Sometimes we feel like the person who corrects us doesn’t love us, but Jesus’ love is not conditional. And Jesus redeemed Martha with unconditional love. Hear now another story of a time when Martha felt that Jesus did not care and how he redeemed the situation. **John 11:1-27**

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

*4 When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” 5 **Now Jesus loved Martha** and her sister and Lazarus.*

You may have heard the phrase...the one whom Jesus loved...referring to John. But it is in John’s gospel that Jesus is recorded as loving Martha, and Mary (though in that line her name wasn’t used) and Lazarus. There wasn’t just one disciple that Jesus loved and we really need to ask ourselves WHY has the church for so many years acted like there was just one! Jesus loved Martha...and Mary and Lazarus, enough to go back to see them even though they lived where the leaders had tried to kill him.

*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 **So** when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, 7 **and then** he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”*

8 “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?”

Jesus loved Martha...and Mary and Lazarus, enough to include them in his greatest miracle. Unfortunately being part of a miracle means you usually have already gone through some gut wrenching, heart breaking times...times when God waits, times when there is no healing, times we don't understand and we do not like.

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^[b] from Jerusalem, **19** and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.

Of course, when Jesus delays and we haven't seen the miracle yet, for some of us, our faith waivers. Not so with the biblical character Martha. She knew Jesus. She loved Jesus. She was not intimidated by him, yet she believed in his power, his character and his willingness to heal. So even when her brother died, and she was disappointed, she still believed in Jesus.

v. 20 said, *“When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.”* Once again Mary chooses a passive role, but in this case Martha is rewarded for her action by a rare verbal revelation of Jesus deity. The key to pleasing Jesus isn't either activity (like Martha) or passivity (like Mary) but choosing to be in the presence of Jesus, being part of whatever he is doing at the time. The key to pleasing Jesus isn't being a particular personality type, but choosing to be in the presence of Jesus, being part of whatever he is doing at the time. If Jesus is teaching, we will be rewarded by sitting and listening. If Jesus is on the move, acting in the world, the place to be is in the middle of the action.

When Martha, being the activist that she was, met Jesus on the road, she was very straightforward with him, just as she had been in the earlier situation. She didn't beat around the bush. I've always liked that and seen it as a strength of my namesake. She spoke her mind and she was not intimidated. *“Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* That woman didn't mince words; she got right to the point. We don't know her tone of voice. We don't know if she said it with her hands on her hips or with anguished grief in her voice, but she was direct...and full of faith. She had faith not only for the good times, but in the face of adversity. She had lost her only male protector and provider. She had no one to stand up for her in court, to earn a living and guard the home. Yet Martha loved Jesus unconditionally. She didn't just love him when he gave her what she wanted; she also loved Jesus through the hard times.

When Martha walked out to meet Jesus it was in the face of disappointment. There was no, “Why did you let this happen to me?” She accepted the reality that there is suffering and illness leading to death that is just part of life...but she also had a faith for the future, for she continued, **BUT I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.**”

She didn't make a special request, but she put her whole fate in the hands of Jesus for whatever Jesus thought best. She was full of faith and her faith was

not in herself...

not in the effectiveness of her request,

not even in the strength of her relationship with Jesus,

but Martha's faith was properly placed in the person of Jesus Christ, God with us. She said, ...

I know that even now, (in the face of death), God will give you (Jesus) whatever you ask. (Not what I think is best, but I trust you, even when I have been disappointed in you.)

Our God is the God of hope, who even in the face of death and discouragement, when we have felt abandoned and neglected by God, God can give us an inner *joy and peace as we trust in him so that we overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* (Romans 15:13)

Jesus met Martha's trust in him by giving her words of encouragement, joy and a source of peace as he said, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*” This is one of only 7 self-descriptions of Jesus introduced by the phrase “I am.” When I read the passage I hear echoes of the voice of God who spoke to Moses saying I am who I am. Jesus is identifying himself as the God of all ages, the great ‘I am’, the God of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, of Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, Leah and Rachel who died long ago...yet he is the God of the living not the dead because he is the resurrection and the life. *Do you believe this?*

Trusting in Jesus requires that we answer this question. I first answered that affirmatively as a child of 8 ½, but it hit me in a very different way when my grandmother died...and later when I faced surgery and had to sign all those forms that say essentially if you die it's nobody's fault...and I had to answer

it at a deeper level when ministry has taken me into places where I had to face death for Jesus...

In housing projects when I went to do a children's Bible program and escaped convicts circled my car.

In a wealthy suburb when a suicidal woman on drugs cornered me in the church kitchen at knife point.

In Chino Hills, the "safest city in San Bernardino County" when a drug dealing pimp threatened my life for working with "his woman."

Think about the times in your life when you or your family faced death, how you felt...

To us there, Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe this? In the Bible story, Martha told him "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world." Martha had heard the teachings of Jesus in her home and accepted it as the truth. She personally had internalized that Jesus was the Messiah who had been predicted for centuries by the prophets of Israel. And when she verbalized this faith her words became a primary pillar of the church.

Peter's profession of faith is more famous now. You may remember the story of how Jesus once asked his disciples who they thought he was, and Peter volunteered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (Mt. 16:13-20)

The early church recognized that it was the content of the statement, not the person of Peter, which was the foundation of the church. The recognition of Jesus as the messiah was the rock on which the church was founded. Two prophets (one man and one woman---Simeon and Anna) identified Jesus as the Messiah when he was brought as a baby to the temple. And the early church recognized that 2 disciples had made a clear identification of who Jesus was as an adult. One was Peter and the other was Martha when she said, "I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world." So the early church held up 2 role models of faith, one for men, one for women...until some time when the Roman church began to focus on the person Papacy.

In our lives there will be opportunities to affirm that for ourselves at progressively deeper levels. Once Martha had made the cognitive affirmation of who Jesus was, he pushed her on beyond her comfort level by asking the stone to be rolled away. At this point I prefer the King James translation, where Martha cries out, "*Lord by this time he stinketh.*"

There will be things in our lives that Jesus will want to uncover, to bring into the light, to heal and revitalize...some of these things we are afraid of because “they stinketh” ... our redemption will involve not only making our affirmation of faith, but also in opening the way for Jesus to forgive, restore, correct, and heal the things in our lives that lead to death, the things that stinketh.... in Jesus love we will all be completely redeemed.