



# Central Peninsula Church

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## At His Feet

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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As we heard already this morning, connecting with other people is such an important aspect of our life together in the body of Christ. I particularly enjoy connecting with people when there's food involved! Whether it's lunch out with a few friends or a large gathering of folks for dinner, it's a great joy. Some of that of course is the food itself. Some of it is the fact that usually someone else is doing all the work of preparing and cleaning. But I think it's also because you never quite know what you're getting into. You never really know which way the conversation is going to turn. And I find that so often I'm surprised by what I learn about someone as the conversation flows. And occasionally I even discover something new about myself while seated with others around the table.

In our passage this morning Martha and her sister Mary are throwing a dinner party for Jesus and His disciples. But as we will see, the conversation takes an unexpected turn, and Martha's meal for the Master turns out instead to be a feast for her own hurried and hungry heart. So please turn this morning to Luke chapter 10 beginning with verse 38.

**'Now as they were traveling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. And she had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord's word, seated at His feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him, and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me'' ( Luke 10:38-40).**

It was just one of those days. You know the kind. Nothing seems to be going right. The alarm rings a half hour late. The coffee is cold and the toast is stale. You pull into the gas station and realize you left your wallet at home. "It's just one of those days," you tell yourself. None of that really matters, because tonight the Master is coming over for dinner. It's going to be so great! You've planned the perfect menu. You just know that Jesus is going to love all four courses. Those mushroom hors d'oeuvres, the salad with fresh crab, your grandmother's homemade pasta recipe, all topped off with your famous triple berry pie. It's going to be the perfect night to entertain the Son of God.

After driving around the parking lot at Trader Joes for 15 minutes, you finally score a parking place somewhere by Circuit City...you fight the crowds...you hurry home keeping an eye out for police...by now you're a bit frazzled and you begin to wonder if Jesus and the disciples might take a rain check. But then you say to yourself: "If I can just work a little faster. If I just try a little harder. And if I can just get a little help from that sister of mine; tonight's going to be great." So you press on with greater urgency and effort.

I think Martha was having one of those days. We've all been there, haven't we? Like Martha we start out with a sincere desire to do good things for others. We give ourselves wholeheartedly to ministry and service. We sign up to love kids, care for a neighbor, teach a bible study, cook a meal for someone in need. We plunge ourselves into it with great energy and passion. But somewhere along the line our service turns sour. Our enthusiasm is all used up. Our determined resolve lies there on the countertop like a dry sponge. Maybe you're there this morning. You started out with the best of intentions – you want to please the Lord in all you do. So you look for ways to serve. You jump in with both feet. But sometimes in all of this activity, you wonder in your heart of hearts, if there's really something more.

What do we do when our sincere desire to serve turns sour? What do we do when our priority for doing good things becomes a barrier to our relationship with the Lord? That's the significant question that our passage takes up for us this morning.

### I. Signs of service overload.

Jesus and His disciples were on the road again. And in the small town of Bethany they come to one of their favorite places to rest. It was the home of Martha and her younger sister Mary, who we suspect from the gospel of John also lived with their brother Lazarus. All three were devoted to Jesus and His teachings. All three are held in great respect and all three played significant roles in His life and ministry. So you can imagine the excitement when Martha sees Jesus and his disciples roll into town. "The Master is here in Bethany. I can't wait to hear the latest news. Mary will be so excited! We'll have them over for dinner."

Martha's into it. She has pulled out all the stops. You can smell the garlic a mile away, the table is set for a wonderful meal. But before long something in Martha's

heart turns very sour. It's important to realize that her intentions were right. Her motives were honorable and her desire to serve was not the question. Which is why it's so important to be reminded as we begin here this morning that Jesus loves doers just like Martha. Remember last week? The Good Samaritan is commended because he's a doer. And the story itself is a flurry of activity. It says he cleaned and dressed the wounds. He put the wounded man on his own beast. He took him to the inn where HE took care of him. And he came back the next day to make sure he was well cared for. That's a doer – who was moved by compassion to love his neighbor as himself with deliberate actions of mercy and care. It's clear that if you want to follow Jesus you've got to get up and do. You've got to put your feet where your faith is! Doing is a good thing!

I'm so grateful and impressed by the multitasking Marthas that surround us. Some people describe this as the type "A" personality. They're typically determined high energy individuals who set out to do a task with great passion and focus. People who know me best tell me I'm probably a type "S" or "Y" somewhere way down the alphabet! It's amazing to watch a Martha in action. My wife (as well as many of you) is a great and very positive example of this. In fact just like Martha, Nancy is in her element when she's cooking a meal for a special guest. When she's in full flight you don't even want to be near that kitchen! I learned a long time ago that you could get seriously hurt when she's in the groove. She's stirring the pasta, checking the oven, tossing the salad, and topping the dessert, creating this vortex of energy as she goes. It's astounding. For me it's a challenge to cook an egg and have my toast come up on time.

Make no mistake, Jesus loves our doing. He loves it when we wholeheartedly look for ways to serve the King. But sometimes our service turns sour like an old pint of half and half. Martha is a whirlwind of service that's going sour as the evening unfolds. And as Luke tells the story, poor Martha becomes a very helpful illustration to us of what happens when the priority and activity of service overshadows our relationship with Jesus Himself.

**A. Distracted.** So what are the signs of "service overload" that we find in this story? Luke tells us in verse 40 that Martha was distracted. In fact it says she was "**distracted by all her preparations.**" The sense of the word "distracted" means to be pulled in several directions at once. It's like trying to have a meaningful conversation on the phone with someone who has several little kids at home. Literally it says that she was distracted or pulled apart by much service. Many of you can relate I'm sure. You're in that season of life when you feel like you hardly get

your chin above water when another wave of activity hits you head on.

I thought it was pretty amazing that while I was studying this passage and preparing to preach I hit one of those unexpected seasons where someone presses fast forward and my life just started to accelerate. Sometimes that's just what life is like. Right when you thought things were going to settle down, everything starts to spin. The kids get sick, the car breaks down, the boss moves up the project deadline. Suddenly you too have become distracted by many things. We know what that feels like don't we? You lose focus. Then you lose your composure. Even though your intentions might be absolutely right on you find yourself pulled in so many directions you don't know which way to turn. That's where we find Martha.

**B. Resentful.** And so distracted Martha turns to Jesus and says, "**Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone?**" (v. 40b).

I'd say that's a pretty gutsy move. But while we may be tempted to point fingers and shake our head at Martha, it's important to see that Martha goes where we all go when the pressure is so great. We get resentful. We start looking around and think "now wait a minute, am I the only one working around here? Why is it always up to me? Doesn't anybody know there are things to get done?" And the service that was once a great fountain of joy has turned into a deep pool of resentment. I'm embarrassed to say that I've been there recently. About two months ago our church staff went together to work for a day on a Habitat for Humanity project up in Daly City. I've got to say as excited as I was to be a part of it all, by the end of the day after climbing around scaffolding all day long, bumping my head twice, I had to have some serious conversations with my attitude. How easy it is, with just the right set of pressures and mishaps, for our eager attitudes to turn sour.

**C. Blaming others.** Now the good thing about Martha is, you always know where she stands. A lot of us can steam under the surface and never let it out. But Martha just lets it fly. And in her frustration she does what many of us do – she looks for someone to nail. You can just hear Martha, up to her elbows in soap suds, banging the pots and pans. Someone called this cupboard cussing, where you slam the cupboards as a way of communicating your anger and frustration. I think Martha was practicing a little cupboard cussing of her own saying "That lazy sister of mine. If she had been a little more helpful the vegetables wouldn't be overcooked. This evening wouldn't be such a disaster. Look at her; she is just sitting there. Doesn't she know there's work to be done?" And under the pressure of it all, Martha looked for someone to blame.

Let me ask you this morning: Are you a blamer? Do you manage the pressures of life by looking for someone to take the blame? When you're overwhelmed and frustrated do you look for ways to dump the whole thing on someone else's shoulders? If you don't know the answer then ask your

wife or your husband, or maybe your own sister or brother. And if you're a blamer they'll be able to tell you, because they've been on the receiving end. But to some degree or another, we're all susceptible to playing the blame game.

**D. Blaming God.** Sometimes in our exhaustion we even blame God. Did you notice that Martha looks at Mary but she speaks to Jesus and says: "And you Rabbi, master, don't you care? She'd listen to you. You go tell her to get herself in gear. Don't you even care about this mess I'm in?" This reminds me of another time when Jesus was accused of being clueless and uncaring. Remember when the disciples were all shivering with fear as the storm threatened to swallow their little boat. They woke Jesus up out of a sound sleep and said "Master, Master, we're going to drown. Don't you care?" Sometimes God seems indifferent to our storms. Sometimes He seems indifferent to our busyness and the pressures we face. But just as Jesus stilled the storm with a word, He now speaks a word into the whirlwind of Martha's distracted heart. Because Martha's problem wasn't her many preparations; her problem wasn't her sister Mary; her problem wasn't an uncaring Rabbi. Martha's problem was Martha. So Jesus, as he always does, turns and addresses the inside of the issue, not the outside. So often we get our insides confused with our outsides.

Max Lucado tells of an incident that happened after he had returned home after a couple of weeks of vacation. He writes:

*I was rested. My energy level was high, so I dressed to go to the church office very early in the morning. My wife... tried to convince me not to go. "It's the middle of the night," she mumbled. "What if a burglar tries to break in?"*

*There had been an attempted break-in at the office a few weeks previously. [Ignoring my wife's concern, I drove to the church,] entered the office complex, disarmed the alarm, and then rearmed it.*

*A few seconds later the sirens screamed. Somebody is trying to break in! I raced down the hall, turned off the alarm, ran back to my office, and dialed 911. After I hung up, it occurred to me that the thieves could get in before the police arrived. I dashed back down the hall and rearmed the system.*

*"They won't get me," I mumbled defiantly as I punched in the code. As I turned, the sirens blared again. I disarmed the alarm and reset it. I walked to a window to look for the police. The alarm sounded a third time. Once again I disarmed it and reset it. Walking back to my office, the alarm sounded again. I disarmed it. Wait a minute; this alarm system must be fouled up. I called the alarm company.*

*"Our alarm system keeps going off," I told the fellow who answered. "We've either got some determined thieves or a malfunction."*

*"There could be one other option," he said. "Did you know that your building is equipped with a motion detector?"*

*Then the police arrived. "I think the problem is on the inside, not the outside," I told them, embarrassed that I was the culprit setting off the alarm.*

When our plans are coming unraveled, when we are pressed to the wall with activity, when our heart to serve turns sour, we are so tempted to play the blame game. To look for an outside source to take the rap for an inside problem.

But what does Jesus do next? Does He jump into action, does he scold Mary to get her in gear? No. Instead He slows Martha down and He speaks deliberately to this anxious and hurried woman. What does Jesus say to an overloaded, resentful, blaming heart?

## II. Jesus speaks to our insides.

**"But the Lord answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted about so many things...'"** (v. 41). I've got to admit that I love this about Jesus, that He consistently slows us down and speaks into our hearts this way. But I hate this about Jesus at the same time. Jesus has this tender way of confronting us with ourselves. He speaks to Martha with this sweet address: "Martha, Martha (calm down a minute; take a deep breath)." You see, He disarms us with His tenderness so He can speak hard truths into our lives. "Martha you're anxious, worried and distracted... and your sour attitude is leaking out all over this dinner party. The problem isn't the dishes; the problem isn't Mary; in fact the problem isn't on the outside, it's on the inside of you Martha."

That's always so hard to hear isn't it? But this is so consistent with the way Jesus operates in our lives.

I can't tell you how many times I've sat with couples through the years who have compiled a long list of complaints. "He never does... She always says... If he would only do..." and the list goes on and on. Some of us have taken the blame game to an art form. You know what I've found? There's always something to complain about in a marriage. There's always something to complain about in close relationships of any kind. There just is. Maybe this morning you've been compiling a list. You've got your legitimate list of grievances and disappointments. But just maybe this morning Jesus is slowing you down in order to say it's not about the outside; it's not even about your wife; or your brother or your kids; but let's talk about you... let's talk about what's going on on the inside of you. And I think, if we are open, that's what Jesus faithfully does. He takes our responses to pressure situations along with the way we treat those around us and He uses them to tell us something about ourselves. And it's usually something hard to hear.

Martha was having one of those days, but now

she's having one of those "ah ha" moments with the Lord as He slows her down to tell her something about her own hurried and anxious heart.

### III. Jesus invites us to sit down and listen.

**A. The "good part" (better thing).** He says to her: **"But only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her"** (v. 42). I wish I could have been there to see Martha's reaction. I think she was completely stunned. Because just like us I really think Martha was serving out of the very best of intentions. She wanted things to go so well; after all, it was Jesus she was entertaining. So she gave it all of her energy and effort. But Jesus is looking into her eyes and saying "My dear Martha, your priority for serving is keeping you from Me. And while you have spent yourself in anxious activity, your sister Mary has chosen the 'good part', the better thing." By the way, we first get an insight about Mary's choice by her posture. Martha was busy standing. Mary on the other hand it says back in verse 39, was **"seated at Jesus' feet."** Martha was busy serving Jesus; Mary was sitting at the Master's feet; letting Jesus serve her.

**B. At His feet.** To sit at someone's feet was to take the posture of an attentive student. It meant that Mary positioned herself like one of the disciples at the feet of the master. This was a huge cultural taboo in Jesus' day. No Rabbi would ever allow a woman to sit at his feet. In fact, later rabbinic traditions would write "May the words of the Torah be burned, they should not be handed over to women." It's interesting to note that just a few short months later at the grave of Lazarus Mary again falls at Jesus' feet. Then just days before the final passover Mary anoints His feet with perfume and wipes them with her hair. Jesus welcomes Mary at his feet as one of His own. These are acts that spring from a broken heart and acts of worship. But on this night Mary is attentive and alert. She's become a disciple, seated at Jesus' feet where it says she is "listening to the Lord's words."

**C. Listening to His words.** That's what Martha missed. In all of her sincere desire to serve and in her anxious whirlwind of activity Martha missed the chance to really be with Jesus. Isn't it interesting that to the lawyer in verse 25 Jesus tells the story of the serving Samaritan and then remember what He tells him. "Now you go and do the same." The emphasis is on doing. But to Martha He says, "Hold everything! Slow down a minute! Martha, stop doing! Sit and listen." It seems that while Jesus commends and even commands us to actively care for others He tells us here through this story that our

servicing is to flow from our relationship with Him. Did you know that? When we spend time with Jesus, sitting at His feet, listening to Him, He sets our priorities in order and He speaks words of truth and grace into our hurried lives. Words that shape the way we live and the way we serve. Remember the answer the lawyer gave to the question: What must I do to inherit eternal life? He said: "Love the Lord, with all your heart soul, mind and strength... and your neighbor as yourself." The story of the compassionate Samaritan defines neighbor love; the second half of this command. But this story reminds us that neighbor love, as good as that is, should always flow from our loving God. Keeping our relationship with Jesus at the center is what orders and energizes our doing. You see, before we can effectively "go and do" we must first "sit and listen." That's what this story is all about.

Lily Tomlin asks: "Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic." But you know what, life with Christ is to be energized, deepened and nurtured through the ongoing habit of sitting at His feet, listening to Him in prayer.

### IV. Listening prayer.

There is really no way around it. The habit of prayer is essential for nurturing our relationship with the Lord. It's in prayer that Jesus comforts us in His love, smoothing the lines of worry on our faces, healing the ache of shame, wiping the tears of our sorrow. And it's in prayer, as we turn our desires over to Him that He energizes us for His service. As we lay our anxious hearts out before Him He stills the storm with the strength of His presence and confirms in us His purpose for our lives. This remember is the pattern of life for Jesus Himself, who was constantly slowing down to meet with the Father in prayer.

In his book *Talking to My Father* Ray Stedman writes: "We must either be praying or fainting... there is no other alternative. The purpose of all faith is to bring us into direct, personal touch with God. True prayer is an awareness of our helpless need, and acknowledgment of divine adequacy. For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing, the very breath of His life. Although God certainly knows all our needs, praying for them changes our attitude from complaint to praise (remember Martha) and enables us to participate in God's personal plans for our lives."

For some of us this may require more effort than others. But don't leave it to someone else. I've been married for 29 years and it took me a good ten years before I really was able to hear what my wife was saying. And I still don't get it right all the time. In fact, I just read that there is now scientific evidence to support this selective hearing. You guys are going to like this: According to researchers at Sheffield University in Northern England, women's voices are more difficult for men to listen to than

other men's. They discovered startling differences in the way the brain responds to male and female sounds. They found that men deciphered female voices using the auditory part of the brain that processes music, while male voices engaged a simpler mechanism. "The female voice is actually more complex than the male voice..." I knew that all along! Now guys, you can use that piece of internet research however you want. But here's the thing. When it comes to personally hearing the voice of God there are no excuses. Our spiritual ears were specifically created like a radar to select out the frequencies of the Master's voice. Remember what Jesus said. He said I am the good Shepherd.... and my sheep hear my voice. Each one of us, as believers, are specifically equipped to hear the voice of our Shepherd.

But hearing His voice takes slowing down to sit at His feet. And that's what Jesus is inviting us to here. C.S. Lewis describes listening to His voice as a conversation we enter into everyday. He writes: "The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists of shoving it all back, in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in."

You see, listening for His voice requires a conscious choice; a choice that we make daily; a choice to push aside a whirlwind of activities and urgent demands in order to slow down and sit at His feet.

But after last week you might say: So which is it? Do I serve like the Samaritan or sit like Mary? Do I actively prove my faith by my works or do I ponder and pray, spending time with Jesus at His feet? The answer of course is "yes" - "yes" I do both. I find ways to give of myself in service to the King. But before I "go and do" I must first "sit and listen." I've got to take my place at Jesus' feet and allow Him to serve me, to minister to my heart and let His priorities shape the way I serve and give. And as we spend time with Jesus He energizes us. He fills us with His presence, to do His work in His power.

May we choose the one good thing. May we hear these words of Jesus this morning and may we slow down to sit at His feet. And in all of our desire to serve Him, may we allow the King to touch us and minister to us in prayer.

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