

**Sermon**  
**Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay**  
**July 17, 2022**

I want to begin by saying a word of thanks to Pastor Brian for inviting me to be part of this worship service. What an interesting coincidence that Brian wasn't able to join us this morning and just happened to have somebody ready. It is a treasure to be here in a place that Brian is serving. Brian and I got to know each other where we were both serving in the Phoenix area back in the 1980s. We had some treasured time together working with young people and going on retreats and leading various gatherings. So Brian has been a special colleague for many, many years. I was looking forward to working alongside him this morning. Thank you for joining him in welcoming me. And I have to say of Betsy and me that Brian and Mary are such treasured friends of ours. I expect you already know this but they are about the finest we have in the ELCA. I'm so glad that you have Brian's attention to guide you in this time of transition. You are a fortunate people.

I should also say that not only are Betsy and I worshipping with you this morning, but also our two sons are with us online. I want to say hi to Brady who is 28 and Landon who is 23. They are back in Denver and joining us.

So this Sunday, the church lays before us this extraordinary story of Mary and Martha. They are the sisters who have the opportunity to spend an evening with Jesus in their home, and who, interestingly enough, experience this time with Jesus in ways that are very different, one from another.

Whenever I hear this story, I find myself thinking of the very first church I worked in. It was Richfield Lutheran Church in southern Minneapolis in Minnesota. And not long before I arrived on staff there, they had completely redecorated their fellowship hall and they had renamed it the Mary and Martha Room. Now it was obvious to me that this was a room that had been designed and funded, and perhaps built, by people who really understood hospitality. Who really knew how to make people feel welcome, especially when there was food on the table. They had these gorgeous chairs. Heavy wooden chairs with soft padded cushions and backs and arm rests. They had tables that were just the right height for a meal and to sip a cup of coffee with a friend. And they had this extraordinary table of refreshments that was piled with treats on a Sunday morning, and they had some of the finest coffee I've ever tasted in my life. I don't know how you do business in California, but in Minnesota, in order to grow a church, you need to have good coffee. They realized that, and took great care of this room. And I was always struck that they named it the Mary and Martha Room. It seemed to me that they were trying to strike a point, that there was nothing wrong with hosting their guests in a room that was very comfortable. They put their energy into a fine gathering on Sunday morning.

I always suspected that some of them might have felt a bit hurt by the words of Jesus this morning. They had spent this life sharing their love with others through their networks of hospitality and table fellowship. So why is it in our gospel lesson this morning that Jesus seems

to disparage Martha's efforts as he commends Mary to sit at his feet and listen? It seems like Mary gets a little bit more credit than Martha in this morning's gospel, doesn't it.

Mary was a bold one. Those were the days when women didn't sit in a circle with the master. That was something that was reserved for the men. But Mary moves right in and sits down and begins to study and learn and listen to Jesus. I love the way that this gospel translation says it [*The Message* by Eugene Peterson], that's she's hanging on Jesus' every word. You can almost imagine the eagerness in her eyes as he speaks. Mary is curious about what she might learn from Jesus that could be of help to her in her life of faith. And she is faithful, in the line of learning how Jesus might help her to draw a bit nearer to God. Mary's attention to Jesus, and his presence with her is a sign of how she chooses to honor that he is in their home with them that night.

The truth is that Martha's actions are every bit as commendable as Mary's. She is a caring woman; she wants her guests to feel special. It reminds me of the first lesson, that Katie read for us this morning, that Abraham and Sarah go overboard in their attempt to welcome these three people into their camp. Martha is doing everything she can to make the dinner just right. She seems to be quite skilled, and it is after years and years of preparing for this kind of gathering. And certainly she is generous as she gives of herself to the guests who gather there in her home. She is faithful in the ways that she takes care of others. And this is the way the Mary chooses to honor that Jesus is there in their home.

Yet in one sort of interesting way, Martha doesn't get it quite right. It seems that she gets caught up in the mechanics of her service. She is worried and distracted. We imagine her measuring her own actions against those of her sister Mary. We imagine her angry that she is the only one responsible for getting dinner prepared, perhaps wishing that she too could sit at the feet of Jesus. Because somebody has to get dinner on the table, and Martha is the one who steps up to make that happen.

Jesus describes her in the midst of her service as becoming worried and distracted by the tasks she has taken on. And that's really the key to today's lesson. You see, Jesus doesn't just commend Mary's listening and then disparage Martha. He tries to help Martha to see that if her loving service is grounded in generosity and love, then it can be the kind of invitation for life faith that Jesus wants her to experience.

This is one of the important things for us to remember today, that as we live and as we serve and we engage as Christians in the public world, that we do so with a spirit and care and compassion for others.

You know that as I was preparing to spend some time with you this morning, I took time to wander around your website a bit, and I was struck by how many times on that website it was visible that the ministry that you carry on in this place is much in the spirit of this morning's lesson. Think of the generosity that you display in your work with Iglesia in your outreach. I think about the commitment to local food pantry and book store across the street. I think of the compassion for the people who are homebound and bringing a meal to them. And even your willingness to study the Scriptures on a regular basis with Pastor Brian, to sit together at the feet

of Jesus and listen to him. And if these ministries are thriving, and I believe that they are, it is because they are not carried out with a spirit of worry and distraction, but that they are carried out in a spirit of love and joy and faithfulness.

My favorite sentence on your entire website is featured on the very front page, where it is written that “from Worship to Service, everything is done from the heart.” What a beautiful testimony from a life together as a community of Christians. “From Worship to Service, everything is done from the heart.” It makes me think that you have heard this story. Mary and Martha’s journey with Jesus, and Mary’s loving attention to Jesus, a model for us all as Christians. It’s not just Jesus wanting us to discover the difference between serving and learning. He’s not talking here about the difference between action and reflection. Jesus isn’t dealing with the gifts that each of us have, with the passions and those kind of things with which we find a connection to our faith. Instead, it seems that what Jesus wants us to know is that, whatever we do, if we do it from the heart, it becomes a blessing to us and to those who are touched by us.

So thank you for living into the spirit of this morning’s gospel lesson. Thank you for allowing Betsy and I to come and experience what you do in worship, and know that as you continue on this journey as a congregation in this time of transition and the leadership of your fine Pastor Brian, you will be in our prayers as well. That you will be filled by the spirit of Jesus in this morning’s gospel, and that through your love and your compassion and your generosity, others might be invited into the heart of God. Amen.

Pastor David Risendal, July 17, 2002