

7-17-2016

## Propers 11 (Pentecost 9) Series C 2016

Phillip L. Brandt

Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup\\_archives\\_sundaysermon](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_archives_sundaysermon)



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brandt, Phillip L., "Propers 11 (Pentecost 9) Series C 2016" (2016). *Sunday's Sermon*. 113.  
[https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup\\_archives\\_sundaysermon/113](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_archives_sundaysermon/113)

This Text Resources is brought to you for free and open access by the CUP University Archives at DigitalCommons@CSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sunday's Sermon by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSP. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csp.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csp.edu).

## **Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 17**

If you have been paying attention to the interrelationship of the Gospel lessons for the past several weeks, Luke has really been defining some things about us. The first weeks after Pentecost saw Jesus defeat Sin, Death, and Devil. The past three weeks have focused on our relationship to and through that saving work. The sixth Sunday after Pentecost saw Jesus send away those who came with acts of zeal, piety, and familial love which were put before him and his mission. Is this the downside of Grace? If God graciously accepts me despite my sin, he also does not accept me because I got something right. It all is by grace. Even on my best days he receives me by grace.

Two weeks ago, Jesus incorporated his disciples into the mission, sending out the 72 on a mission which was successful, fruitful, and an occasion for joy for both the disciples and Jesus. Again, through this whole event, ran a strong message that the sinner could not take credit for this. Yes, even the demons obeyed them, but the real story was that their names were written in heaven. This was particularly strong in the verses which were omitted, vs 21ff. There Jesus rejoiced and thanked God that he had revealed the heavenly things to little children – essentially calling his disciples the equivalent of toddlers. That was not about their innocence, as moderns picture children, but it was really about their incapacity.

The parable of the Good Samaritan last Sunday reinforced this. The man sought to justify himself and Jesus defined his neighborhood impossibly large. And yet, he also gave us the same command, to go and do likewise. The Gospel we found in the fact that Jesus also was a man who was bleeding, naked, and more than half dead. And so we said last week that this was not of ourselves, but of Christ working in and through us. We could not live so selflessly, but he did, and now he lives in us.

Today we get another very familiar story in our Gospel lesson, the story of Mary and Martha, which has been the occasion for a lot of LWML Bible studies and the source of some mischief. The preacher might be tempted to ignore this story because it has been used by some to foment for the ordination of women. But to ignore this on that account would be a mistake, for this text tells us something very important about Jesus and us. Particularly it has something to say about how he sees us. For that has really been the theme these past several weeks. We have wanted to say that there is something about me that makes me worthy of his attention. But he has been asserting that this all his gracious love.

The Epistle picks up the second half of the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Christians of Colossae. He will connect this Jesus of Nazareth, at whose feet Mary sits today, with the whole of creation. Jesus' great redemption act was not for my soul alone, nor even for the people alone, but for the whole God's creation which he once called very good, and which he loves with an indescribable love.

## Collect of the Day

O Lord, grant us the Spirit to hear Your Word and know the one thing needful that by Your Word and Spirit we may live according to Your will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Grant us the Spirit to hear God's Word and know the one thing needful... which of course has us asking about the one needful thing. Do you suppose we have missed the one thing needful? Then the prayer suggests that it is by Word and Spirit that we live according to His will, which rather has us asking again which of these two is the one thing needful, Word or Spirit? False choice. To have the Word is to have the Spirit and to have the Spirit is to have the Word, they are not the same thing but they are inseparable.*

*But is this the one thing needful? Yes, because the Word/Spirit engages us in the relationship which we call faith and through that relationship we are saved by God from the foes and the death which we cannot escape. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves just what we mean by even so basic of a word as "know." We use the word "know" in many different ways. I recollect that in Genesis 4, Adam "knew" Eve and about nine months later along comes Cain. That is not an intellectual activity. We speak of "knowing him" or "knowing her" and we are not really talking about a set of data points that we have filed away in our brain, but we are really talking about a relationship. Is this what it means when it says we "know the one thing needful." Is this the knowledge of some fact or conceptual truth or is it much more like knowing a friend? The Word is also Jesus, not just the text which is found on the page. We considered that another way to speak of the one needful thing is actually faith. Martha's problem in the Gospel reading is not the work she is doing, but the relationship in which she is doing it. Her concern for the fairness/offence of Mary betrays that this is not service rendered as worship but something else, something which is not of faith, but of that old human need to settle accounts. We will fundamentally misread the Gospel account if we imagine that Mary got it right and Martha got it wrong and that is a check mark in the Mary column. In truth we are all both Mary and Martha all the time – sinner and saint.*

*If one has that interconnectedness of Spirit, Word, Faith, and Knowledge in place, then this prayer is wonderful. However, if one retains the very human notion that faith is somehow some sort of a work which the human being accomplishes, or a knowledge which one possesses, or that the one thing needful is some sort of decision reached or prayer said, then this prayer will be the voice of a terrible task master and you will hate it. For it will always hold out for you that you need to do something and get it right before you have the one thing needful, and without that needful thing you will not be able to live right, or as the prayer says, according to the will of God.*

*That last phrase is also a source of much spiritual mischief in the life of people. Too many spend their days in some sort of fruitless search for the will of God, never realizing that the will of God is simply that they live. To live according to the will of God can also be simply understood to live*

*because God wills it. We at times can look for the exact will of God to be discerned in every decision and moment, and tie ourselves up in knots over this. Or at least I should say that some do. Most Christians in fact keep this pretty well straight. But more than one has come to me looking to discern the will of God and been paralyzed by the thought of making the wrong choice. To a person in that difficulty we must speak a promise. God will bless you in any decision you make. He will find a way to make every situation a situation in which He works. That is his promise, his will.*

*But when we address the person who has this in some sort of balance, we can say that God's will is that we live and not die. To live according to the will of God seems to be as simple as being the object of his salvation and therefore baptized, forgiven, redeemed, resurrected, person. Of course, the one thing needful here is the relationship in which God does this, the relationship he establishes by his grace. We call that relationship faith.*

*So what exactly is the prayer asking for? Is it not asking for the Spirit, a gift already given? Are we not herein really praising God for what he has already done and acknowledging that the gift of Spirit and Word enable us to live? Is this prayer a request or a word of praise couched as a request? Or is it one of those wonderful Lutheran now/not yet moments?*

## **Readings**

Genesis 18:1-10a (10b-14) *I thought it helpful to keep this in some context, so I continued the story for a few moments. It is hard to remember that the promise of a miracle child is actually so closely connected to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.*

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth <sup>3</sup> and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, <sup>5</sup> while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." <sup>6</sup> And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." <sup>7</sup> And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. <sup>8</sup> Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

<sup>9</sup> They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." <sup>10</sup> The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> The LORD

said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” <sup>15</sup> *But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”*

<sup>16</sup> *Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. <sup>17</sup> The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup> seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.” <sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, <sup>21</sup> I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”*

*This is a wonderful text. Abraham is portrayed as the perfect Middle Eastern host. In this part of the world it is a great honor to have a guest and Abraham makes the most of it, especially considering who the guest is. He scurries about, he prepares a feast. He is, despite his great age, an ideal host. Normally an old man like Abraham would have had his children do this, but of course, Abraham has no children to do this. Ishmael is still too young.*

*Contrast this with the Mary/Martha story. Many interpret the Mary/Martha story and suggest that the service of Martha is the problem, but Abraham is commended here for being a servant. Again, it is not the service of Martha that is the problem, but it is the attitude and motive which distinguish her from Mary and Abraham. Her luncheon could have been served in the same faith as Abraham served and Mary listened. Interestingly, here we have Abraham serving and Sarah listening, but the faith/faithless roles are reversed. The one who is listening is considered faithless, and the one who is serving is the faithful one.*

*But this is not a story which is encouraging hospitality. It is a story of God’s promise to the people of his day and our day. Sarah will have a child, indeed, the child. Through this child the line of the promise will come. He will be a miracle baby. Her womb, in Paul’s words, is as good as dead. (Romans 4) She knows it and so when the promise is spoken she laughs at the promise. God hears her failure of faith but he does not rebuke her harshly. Instead he turns her laughter into a gentle reminder of God’s love and power. The child will be named Isaac which means “laughter.” The cynical laughter of her lack of faith will be turned into the laughter of joy as she holds the child she has so longed for in her arms.*

*This is also more than just the story of the continuance of the line of Abraham. This is a miracle baby and all miracle babies, and there are several of them, remind us of the miracle of Jesus birth. Isaac in his birth looks a little like Jesus. We start to see his familiar face staring back at us from the pages of Genesis.*

*Of course, as we noted in the prayer, this is also a passage about Faith. Now Faith is not an easy road as many who know nothing about faith portray it. Nor is Faith simply some sort of surrender of self as Islam and some Calvinists would have us say. It is, remember, a relationship in which God acts, he saves us, despite our condition and selves.*

*In years past we have wondered if the three-ness of the visitors is a reflection of Trinity. Is this another occasion to speak of the pre-incarnate Christ? God eats a meal here – is there a sacramental connection as well. Sarah would have made unleavened bread so quickly, the same sort of unleavened bread Jesus ate at that Passover meal we still celebrate as the Eucharist. Is this a line of inquiry which we ought to pursue further?*

*It is not the inquiry which we pursued in the past but we were drawn to the fact that Sarah laughed – she denied it, lied about her denial, but God simply declares her lack of faith. We don't get that tension resolved here, but we do later. When God returns and Sarah is holding that infant, it is named Isaac – which means Laughter. Every time she called her little boy in for bath or supper, his name would have been a reminder both of her faithlessness and God's amazing and gracious promise keeping to her. Her cynical laughter of doubt was turned to the laughter of an old woman given the gift she had longed for her whole life – a child of her own.*

Psalm 27:(1-6) 7-14

The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?

<sup>2</sup>When evildoers assail me  
to eat up my flesh,  
my adversaries and foes,  
it is they who stumble and fall.

<sup>3</sup>Though an army encamp against me,  
my heart shall not fear;  
though war arise against me,  
yet I will be confident.

<sup>4</sup>One thing have I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD  
and to inquire in his temple.

<sup>5</sup> For he will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;  
he will lift me high upon a rock.

<sup>6</sup> And now my head shall be lifted up  
above my enemies all around me,  
and I will offer in his tent  
sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

<sup>7</sup> Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;  
be gracious to me and answer me!

<sup>8</sup> You have said, "Seek my face."  
My heart says to you,  
"Your face, LORD, do I seek."

<sup>9</sup> Hide not your face from me.  
Turn not your servant away in anger,  
O you who have been my help.  
Cast me not off; forsake me not,  
O God of my salvation!

<sup>10</sup> For my father and my mother have forsaken me,  
but the LORD will take me in.

<sup>11</sup> Teach me your way, O LORD,  
and lead me on a level path  
because of my enemies.

<sup>12</sup> Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;  
for false witnesses have risen against me,  
and they breathe out violence.

<sup>13</sup> I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD  
in the land of the living!

<sup>14</sup> Wait for the LORD;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the LORD!

*This is one of the most famous of Psalms whose theology is deep and wide. You might consider it as the outline of a sermon – a reflection on Abraham's faithful response to God or of a person considering what Jesus has done. It has trust in the face of death, hope in the resurrection, courage in the face of an overwhelming adversary, and much more.*

Colossians 1:21-29 *I have included the final words of last week's text so you can see how this connects. Alas, but the six verses between are omitted. They are included elsewhere in the pericopes in the year, but this paragraph is really the intellectual heart of this whole letter. The preacher who undertakes to preach Colossians can hardly leave it out.*

<sup>13</sup> *He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,* <sup>14</sup> *in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

<sup>15</sup> *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.* <sup>16</sup> *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.* <sup>17</sup> *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* <sup>18</sup> *And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.* <sup>19</sup> *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,* <sup>20</sup> *and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

<sup>21</sup> *And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,* <sup>22</sup> *he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,* <sup>23</sup> *if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.*

<sup>24</sup> *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,* <sup>25</sup> *of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,* <sup>26</sup> *the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.* <sup>27</sup> *To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* <sup>28</sup> *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.* <sup>29</sup> *For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*

*This is simply one of the most amazing passages of Scripture. It says nothing that you cannot find elsewhere, but it brings a number of elements together in a way which never ceases to astound me. For Christians of this generation, and especially for Christians of North America who have watched in horror as fires have torched enormous forests in the West, floods have inundated Houston repeatedly, and we seem to be incapable of satiating our thirst for things, this is a message of particular pertinence. God loves the whole of his creation.*

*Tragically the guts of this have been removed from our pericope because they were used elsewhere. The preacher who is considering this text will need to consider seriously the return of verses 15-20 to the reading. Look at the first italicized paragraph and count the number of times the word "things" appears therein. I have at least six, and that is because our translators were trying to avoid too much repetition. Simply put, this is the cosmic Christ who is not just*

*reconciling our souls to himself, but the whole of his creation, yes our bodies too, but also the waters of the Gulf, the landfills, the rivers, the trees, the rocks, and the birds and all the rest of his creation.*

*For Paul, in prison, this has serious implications and we will do well to follow them out for they apply to all of us. Notice that the Colossians have been reconciled to God through the body of Jesus' flesh. Paul is taking on the very ancient Greek and very modern idea that God only cares about "spiritual" or non-physical things. This is simply not so. Jesus shed his real red, sticky, salty blood to save the physical world, including my physical self.*

*The ancient Greek idea which Paul opposed devalued the physical realm. To the Greeks God was spirit, so he was only concerned about the spiritual things. The physical things of life were considered as a prison of sorts, to be escaped in the next life. The truly spiritual soul would be freed from this. Of course this meant this physical life was not terribly important, in much the same way that an imprisoned man really is not concerned about the state of the prison. He just wants to put it behind him and never see it or think about it again. One sometimes finds Christians sitting in the pews who still hold this idea. They will say that one should not cry at funerals, the body is just a husk, the real life is in heaven, etc. The Bible never says this.*

*Outside the Church, however, one finds another sort of issue, and inside the Church it is often disavowed verbally but functionally it operates as well. Modernity has oddly come at this question of God and creation from the other direction and ended up in much the same place. Since the enlightenment we have increasingly demythologized creation, essentially taken God out of the picture. The planets are not held in orbit about the sun by divine power, but by a force of gravitation operating in predictable and regular ways. Likewise the color of my eyes, the fact my hair is gray, or the fact that my back hurts has nothing to do with God, but is the result of genetics, stress, and poor lifting technique. If God is active at all in this, he is the divine legislator who wrote the law of Gravity and now is watching it all play out from a distance. Most Christians today are functionally deists in this regard. God is up there, but he is not actively or intimately engaged in my life or this world. He might intervene if I am in extreme duress, but he mostly ignores the mundane realities of my life. The only exception is if my conscience goads me, then I am pretty sure God is watching, but it is always to judge me.*

*If you ask most of my students and chances are many of your parishioners, what is the opposite of Spiritual, they will say, "physical." But Paul does not agree with them. The opposite of spiritual is actually "worldly" or "fleshly." When I talk to my students at school I often ask them if my car is a spiritual thing? Of course, on one hand, it has no soul, but in another and very real sense it of course is a spiritual thing. I use it to ferry my children to and from school, I haul my groceries home in it to care for my and their bodies, I bring them to church and vacation, and in so doing am a good father to them. For these reasons and more, my car is a spiritual thing. I say so because all those activities are actually serving God. He gave me the children to care for, he gave me the body to feed, and he created and redeemed the whole of my life. That vehicle, in*

*making that life better, sweeter, or even just functional, is a spiritual thing. In its physicality it is used in relationship to him.*

*My car can also be a worldly or fleshly thing. If it feeds my pride, if it hinders my service to God, If I have bought a car because my midlife crisis led me to purchase a vehicle which is totally inappropriate for my family, say the Audi TT I saw the other day or the Porsche which caught my son's eye. That might be a less than spiritual vehicle. Likewise my grocery money is just as spiritual as my offering, but that is not necessarily so. If I fill my grocery cart with unhealthy things and poorly serve my family by the choices that I make, it might be a worldly or fleshly sort of thing. And depending on what I buy at the grocery, it might be increasingly fleshly as I pack on the pounds!*

*Paul proclaims a God who has redeemed all things by taking up "thingliness" to himself in the incarnation of Christ. We cannot say God became a thing – that would suggest that God changes, but God took up to himself the nature of created humanity. This is important and Paul makes that connection immediately. Christ's physical death and resurrection present the reader holy and blameless before God. It is absolutely critical to notice that the Colossians and we are enjoined to continue in the faith, not attain to it. Salvation is not a goal but a starting point for the Christian. They already have it. Remember this is one of the themes of the whole book. He has folks who are disdainful of the faith of the simple and holding up knowledge as some sort of superior gift. Paul is not anti-knowledge, but he thinks they have the ordering of these gifts backward. One can grow in the gift knowledge or even have very little of it and still be Christian. In Paul's sense here, faith is the primary gift of God, and as he means it, Faith is a yes or no sort of thing. One either has it or one does not. It is not scalable.*

*But again, notice that this faith is proclaimed in all creation. You might want to re-read Romans 8 here to encounter another Paul's treatments of this. There he speaks of all creation groaning as it awaits the revealing of the sons of God. Perhaps Francis of Assisi preaching to the animals is not so far out there after all!*

*If this is not enough, Paul takes this integration of God and his creation to a most unusual place. He rejoices in his sufferings, because God has reconciled the whole of creation, even his suffering. Remember Christ has reconciled all things, even the whip which has lashed him, the soldier who wielded it, the blood which he shed, etc. Now, Paul's sufferings are not only sacred as an offering to God, they are also part of God's salvation of the world. They are somehow joined to the work of Christ on the cross. Remember two weeks ago when Paul enjoined no one to pester him because he bore on his body the marks of Christ. Was he referring to the scars from his stoning, lashings, and other travails? Or did he mean that he was a stigmatic as some have claimed? We don't know. (Again, you might just consider Francis of Assisi for another famous stigmatic.)*

*How odd Paul's reflection on suffering sounds to the modern ear and that is likely where we need to go with this as a sermon. We tend to see our suffering as something of great evil, and*

*indeed, heaven will be free of suffering because it is a result of the fall. But God has reconciled all creation to himself, says Paul, and that means that nothing is beyond his redemption, even suffering. I think of that when I am pulling weeds from my garden as I did today. They are so tenacious and would soon overwhelm the pitiable things I have planted. I still curse the weeds, but it may well be that I will love them in heaven and not consider them the pestilence that I do now.*

*The other element which the preacher may want to address that the incarnation of Christ allows Paul to engage in his ministry with great energy. It is God working in him. He is revealing a mystery, that the Gentiles are included in the true Israel. We don't stand in awe of that in quite the same way that Paul did. After all, we are gentiles and of course we are included. Indeed, we stand in awe of the idea that Jews might be. But remember that at the time of Paul the gentiles were thought by most Jews to be utterly lost, outside the family and kingdom of God.*

*Now these gentiles have Christ in them, the very power of God at work in Paul the Jew is at work in them, through the vehicle of faith.*

*Luke 10:38-42 (At Mary and Martha's house) Again, for contextual reasons I have include the verses immediately prior. Right after this account of Mary and Martha, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer.*

*<sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" <sup>37</sup> He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."*

*<sup>38</sup> Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. <sup>39</sup> And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." <sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, <sup>42</sup> but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."*

*Last week's text ends with an injunction to go and do, it criticized the priest and Levite who did not help the man but walked on by, presumably to engage in more spiritual things. This text on the other hand portrays Mary doing nothing, Martha being a good hostess and feeding the hungry man who has come to her house, and yet the picture is turned on its head. The tension is worthy of some attention on our part. Why does Luke put these two right next to each other? It seems that the Good Samaritan story has a built in predilection to a moralizing read. Here he swaps the situation and the commendation/approbation. Martha who does is criticized and Mary who does not do is commended. I think the tension between these stories is necessary to reading*

*them. If you only have one and then the other without the connection, you get two moralizing stories. Last week it was be nice to strangers, this week it will invariably come down to some form of “read your Bible.” But I think both readings ultimately miss the larger question, the question of the one thing needful which the Samaritan and Mary have – the relationship which God bestows in baptism and which we do not create – the relationship we call Faith.*

*This text speaks to our expectations of God and his breaking those expectations. Mary and Martha were apparently among those women who funded Jesus’ ministry. We read about this group at the end of Luke 8. Of course John gives us more insights into this household which included Lazarus, the man he resurrected in John 11. Many have seen something of an indication of Luke’s original audience in his inclusion of this story and the earlier mention of the women. We know from elsewhere (the story of Lydia and Paul for example) that many early converts to Christianity were slaves and wealthy women. It is thought that in the ancient world men of means often travelled. Their marriages were really political and economic alliances as much as relationships of love and mutual care. This is not to say that truly loving and supportive marriages did not exist, we know they did, but we also know that in the wealthy social ranks, the marriages were often otherwise. Caesar Augustus had to encourage the wealthy senators of Rome to have children lest their families completely die out. Germany some other European countries today have incentivized child-bearing by paying young couples to have children.*

*Often wealthy individuals would own more than one home. The man’s wife might live in one, with slaves and servants of her own, and rarely even see her husband. We know that such women were often quite capable individuals, exercised considerable authority within the home, but outside it women were completely shut out of politics and public life. While we have very little literature which addresses the plight of these women, the little we have suggests that some were very frustrated with this situation. It is thought that such women were often the ones who opened their “domus” to the early Christian movement hosted the house churches.*

*Luke seems to be suggesting that Jesus empathized with these women and valued them. In fact, he seems to be taking some pains to point out how Jesus also treated women differently than the dominant culture did. Is he offering validation to the women of the first century who were so critical to the early Christian movement in the Empire? Is Jesus sort of a feminist in this regard?*

*Jesus is at the home of Mary and Martha. We know Lazarus was also resident in that home, and in a normal situation, most authors would have said that this was the house of Lazarus who had two sisters living with him. In fact, that is the way John refers to it. But not only does Luke describe this oddly, but his portrayal of Mary would have been shocking to the original audience. In the ancient world, religious studies were almost exclusively a male affair. Plato will reference a woman who taught Socrates in the Symposium, but most of the time it was men. Mary takes a seat at the feet of Jesus with the disciples. This is the disciples’ place; this is a technical term for being taught by the Rabbi.*

*Martha's critique is not really about not getting Mary's help. It may have in part been that, but mostly she is shocked that her sister is breaking a social norm. Women don't sit at the feet of Rabbis and act like disciples. It is just not done. In the same way that some occupations have been exclusively male and it is shocking to see a woman in that role or vice versa, it was shocking for Martha. Is Luke putting into Martha's mouth the criticism of those who think that Christianity of the first century was somewhat socially subversive? We know that some early critics of the Christian movement suggested that they were overturning social mores and customs, including sexual roles. Is Luke putting their criticism into the mouth of Martha so Jesus can address her and the critics of that second generation? Perhaps.*

*Jesus' answer is probably what will interest us more. Martha is worried about lunch, but Mary is partaking of the Bread of Life. Jesus commends her choice. I don't think Jesus is suggesting that the Ladies Aid Society which provided a meal for widow Schmidt and her family after the funeral was doing something wrong, even if they got up a little early from the funeral to make final preparations for the folks who would soon partake. He might have had a problem with Edna Larson if she did not listen to a thing the preacher said because she spent the entire service counting and recounting heads and wondering if they had enough pie.*

*The words which Jesus used to describe Martha are important here. She was distracted, she was anxious, and she was troubled. Those are all mental states which relate to her service. She was not joyful, nor was she reverent, and she did not apparently see her service as something which was given to God in the same way as Mary's intense listening. It was in some sort of competition with such listening.*

*The Sunday School teacher experiences Christ just as much in the service rendered to the children in her classroom as the person intensely participating in the Bible study or sitting in the pew. That is hard to see sometimes.*

*I think Jesus ate the meal which Martha set before him. He enjoyed and thanked her for her hospitality. But he also spoke of a priority, in much the same way that he spoke of a priority to the man who wanted to bury his dead father or say good bye to his relatives before he followed Jesus. Martha was doing a good and even a necessary thing. But Mary had, in listening to the Word of Life done the first thing.*

*Our parishioners need this reminder as do we. It is very easy to be so busy that we forget the one thing needful. It is also easy to be so guilty about being busy that we tie our guts into guilty knots because we are so busy, which is just another form of the same thing. Jesus is really urging Martha to take her eyes off herself and to focus on him. She could have done that while making sandwiches or by listening, but he needs to be the focus. And so goes the message for us too. Our human predilection is to focus on ourselves, our worth, even whether we have the one needful or necessary thing. And lose sight of the fact that Jesus is the necessary one and in our baptisms we have him. Faith is simply looking at him. I can see his hands and his love at work in the funeral*

*lunch I am preparing for the family of the man who died and whose funeral I just snuck out of a little early so I could make it just right, because it is for my friends, but it is also for Him.*

*How do we talk about Mary and Martha without furthering hurtful stereotypes and statements about women? Many who agitate for women's ordination turn to this passage and see Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, looking like a disciple. They wonder why the inclusion of Mary in that group is not given greater weight. They often see this through the lens of rights and often perceive that women have been denied the right to serve as a pastor. But that language of "rights" is probably not the right lens for this. The text itself is not agitating for this. It is a faith text, it seems to me. But once someone has bumped hard against the curb of women's ordination in the LCMS, it is often a very sore point. The preacher will want to exercise a little caution here. One can be terribly right in this situation. Winning the argument and crushing the woman who raises the question is hardly pastoral. We need to recapture the idea that ordination is not about power and authority, at least not as the world understands those words. It is about service and faith, and within that are indeed power and authority, but not the sort of power and authority which are achieved through the claim of rights. No one has the right to be a pastor, male or female. It is a vocation, a calling from God.*

## **Law and Gospel**

1. I am so busy, I am so wrapped up in the things of this life that I often feel that I am simply running around and totally off focus from Jesus. I don't have time to read my bible, to attend the study, to open up my church newsletter and just sit down and read it. When I sit down in the pew, my mind races to the thousand things I have to do this afternoon when I get home. I cannot focus on Christ, so he focuses on me. He comes into my home and my life, physically and truly in the people, events, and things of this world.
2. I often don't recognize him for what he is right there. I am so egocentrically focused in all this, that I don't see him in all this. And this is a tragedy. I would be so much happier if I did. But the really good news is that he sees me in all this. He has died for every single thing, all of it. His blood shed was red and sticky on that day he died. It made a soft "drip, drip" when it landed on the hard Judean soil into which the soldiers stood that cross. And that shed blood has rendered sacred the whole of this creation. Now, all of it, even the parts I don't like, have become vehicles for him to help me.
3. Jesus is a great healer of blindness, even my own self-centered blindness. He smiles at Martha, he does not scold her, but invites her to take her place beside Mary that day. This same Jesus sat long ago and rejoiced in the hospitality of ancient Abraham, because it was a gift rendered to his Lord, the Lord who had opened his eyes. So too, my life, whether it is spent in learning or serving or something else, is an occasion for me to see his smiling face in all that I see and do.

## Sermon Ideas

1. Serving Him (Based on the OT and Gospel lessons – that Jesus would lay claim to the whole of the hearer’s life, even the service rendered, so that everything we do could be a joy, for it is all a service rendered unto him.)

We could also point to the Epistle reading in which Paul says that Jesus is working powerfully in him.

This sermon is really a sermon on incarnation and the doctrine of vocation. Martha’s problem is not in what she is doing, but her fretting about it, her fixation upon it, as if it was the thing which was most important. I don’t think Jesus is telling her that she is doing the wrong thing, it is her attitude toward her doing which he addresses here. Abraham also diligently and dutifully served, but he saw what is not obvious to all in this situation. The one he serves is no mere guest but the presence of God to him. Likewise our service can consume us and feel like it stands in the way of our experiencing God. It is almost the case that I am on so many committees at church that I don’t have time to worship.

Many of us express the need to retreat, take time off, in order to escape the work-a-day world so we can find God. But if you think about this, such a notion is a rather odd thing to say. God is not more present in the distant place. If our eyes are open to it, he is right here. We experience him in all these things. Abraham did when he served the three visitors. Martha could have as well, but she saw only herself, her sister’s shocking behavior, and the fact that she was stuck with all the work. But just as much as her sister experienced Christ in listening at his feet, she might have experienced him in the lunch she served.

We really don’t need a retreat from this world to find Jesus. He is all around us. The Epistle lesson speaks of how he has reconciled all things to himself, including my job, my family, my house, my car, the whole spectrum of my life, the things I love, the things I do, even the things from which I suffer. That means that I don’t need to leave work to see Jesus, I don’t need to get away from my responsibilities to my family or to my neighbor to experience Jesus. I see his smiling face in my whole life. In fact, he comes to me, it is not the case that I must come to him, he comes to me. There is only one thing that is necessary, and he is there. He put himself there when he died on the cross for the sins of the whole world. He put himself there when he entered the flesh of humanity and ran the human race. He put himself there when he worked at his father’s side in Nazareth, when he went to school and especially when he died and rose to real and human life again.

The Gospel in this text is potent – God comes to Abraham in his great age, faithfully waiting and serving as a waiter. God promises, Abraham believes, and that makes the service of Abraham different. That same promise incarnate came to Mary and Martha’s house that day long ago, just as he has come to this house today. Wherever two or three gather in his name, he is there. His presence is what makes our service different than duty, different than some competition or point scoring in the divine game of heavenly lottery. It makes my service into worship, something more like the woman who broke the jar of perfume and anointed Jesus feet than what Martha did today or what we often do.

We are not really called to choose between doing what Mary or Martha did. Both could be serving, faithful, and holy. But we are called to faith – in whatever we have put before us today. Is it service, it is service to Him? Is it listening? It is listening to him. Is it suffering, Paul even tells us that such suffering is in Him. The preacher might just want to ask what brings us to church today. Is it really that we have the right music, right programs, or the friendliest congregation in town? It would seem that the presence of Jesus makes the difference here. He calls, some folks respond to his call. I am not against friendly congregations with good music and programs, but I think sometimes, like Martha we make too much of them.

We also found it useful to remember the great faithfulness which Martha exhibited in the resurrection of Lazarus. She is the one who expressed the firm conviction in the resurrection.

2. All Things – even those things. (Epistle – That the hearer would not limit God’s salvation to the soul or some other “spiritual” realm, but see that God has even reconciled the unpleasant and difficult things to life to himself, and through them works his kingdom.)

Paul proclaims the cosmic nature of Jesus today and the preacher will want Jesus to lay his claim over the whole of the creation. Jesus sheds his red and sticky blood on the hard ground of Judea that he might save every red corpuscle flowing through your veins. Not a sparrow falls to the ground but he knows and cares.

For Paul in a prison cell that means something about his imprisonment. It is something for which Jesus died, and through which now, for all its sinful character, God will work his kingdom. Indeed, Paul can embrace his suffering with which he is afflicted. He can look at it and without knowing how it will turn out, be confident that even this evil plan of Satan will somehow work out to God’s satisfaction. It might hurt, he is aware of that, but it will not be outside the salvation of God, ever.

For God has reconciled to himself the whole of creation, redeeming even my suffering. I never saw this so potently demonstrated as I did in the saintly old folks who have died in my congregations. I particularly remember Kay, a wonderful servant of God who was

diagnosed with a nasty form of cancer. Her last months were an emotional yo-yo for her family as hope after hope was dashed by the tenacity of this scourge. There were Sundays when Kay would show up to church, ashen from the exertion of walking up the front steps, but her smile never dimmed and her praise of God was steadfast. I learned a lot about dying in hope from Kay. Her suffering was part of God shaping this preacher and I am sure the lives of many others who knew her in those days.

Paul saw his suffering as intimately connected to Christ's suffering. Paul thus saw his imprisonment inside the salvific stream of God's work, and we too are given to see our whole life, yes, even our dying day, within that stream. God has reconciled the whole of his creation and now no part of it escapes his blessing. He has claimed the whole of it, loved it all, redeemed it all.

For Paul this meant his suffering changed and his whole life was lived in an intense service to God. Look especially at the end, Paul is energized for his ministry and service because Christ has reconciled even his body to God, Christ now dwells within him.

3. Christ in You – The Hope of Glory (Epistle – that the Holy Spirit would encourage the hearer to faithful and patient service)

This sermon is really intended for a congregation which is discouraged or which sees itself as small or somehow in decline. It wants them to trust that God has place and purpose for them in the Kingdom of God and that their service, however humble, is an occasion for God's kingdom of come and his will to be done.

Paul wrote to folks who thought that suffering and death must mean that God has no part of this world. The Greek ideas which Paul seems to be combatting in Colossae suggest that only the spirit can be of God. The rest, the physical world, must be a prison or a problem which we escape. But Paul turns that on its head. Jesus has redeemed and reconciled our bodies and our minds to God through the death of Jesus – the blood which he shed.

Paul now can look at his sufferings and see something other than a repudiation of God's presence. Indeed, he sees the very mystery of the kingdom of God – Jesus saved us all through suffering and death. Paul's sufferings are part of that Kingdom now.

In the second paragraph he makes this astounding claim: Christ is in us and that means we have the hope (expectation) of glory. For Paul the presence of Christ means he will suffer. After all Christ suffered. But Christ also works powerfully in the body of Paul. Paul knows that this suffering is not the end of the story. Jesus did not stay in the grave. He did not suffer always. He rose. He is in Glory now. That is our end as well. We have an expectation of that glory too.

For a congregation this is profoundly good news. Christ is in us. The world tells us that we are failures and have not succeeded. The world measures us by growth and budgets and all the things which the world can see. It is a great temptation for us to measure the same things. But Paul has turned the world upside down. The world says that suffering must be a sign of God's displeasure or that this world is not of God. But Jesus looks like a failure to the world when he hangs on the cross. Yet, faith says he is defeating all our enemies in a cosmic struggle in which Easter shouts his victory. The world cannot see that, but we can. The world cannot see his presence in our midst either, but faith can, we can.

Our numbers may not be large, our budget may not be growing. Indeed, institutions sometimes do die. The day may come when this congregation is no more. But Christ is here right now. He is working in our midst. He is blessing the children in our VBS. He is comforting the woman in the hospital who is hurting and afraid. He is putting an arm around the grieving friend and having coffee with the neighbor through us. Jesus is at work right here right now. That work will always have value and beauty because he is here.

We cannot know what tomorrow brings. Suffering and death is part of this kingdom. But there is also an expectation of Glory on that account. We don't know what tomorrow brings but we know what eternity holds for us – life, sweet life with Christ. For Paul that worked a powerful missionary spirit within him. His hands and feet were energized to proclaim the gospel in all the corners of the Mediterranean world. For another it might inspire the love of a neighbor or a life of service to a needy child. But Christ works in all of us, for we all have that same expectation driving us out of these doors. It might not look like success according to the world. But don't worry about that. Jesus is not worried about that. He is glad to be working through you. What he will do with that is his concern.

The story of Mary and Martha might be an excellent connection to make here. Martha's problem is not that she is making sandwiches and Mary is listening. Martha's problem is that she is not making sandwiches like Mary is listening. Her hospitality is just as much an act of worship and devotion as Mary's attentive listening.

Abraham might also be a good connection. This old and worn out man is serving. But God, with a twinkle in his eye, notes that Abraham and Sarah are not so worn out as the world might see. In a year they will have a baby. Sarah sees this with worldly eyes and she laughs that God could do such a thing, not believing this promise. But God has the last laugh and when he returns to Abraham the following year and she holds Isaac joyfully in her arms, a child named "Laughter."