

✝ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

We heard last week in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, that the best place to “*Go and do mercy*” is in our homes — in our homes and among each other in this congregation. We need not be anxious about seeking out a neighbor on the side of the road, or a solicitor in the parking lot, or someone in need at a stoplight. We will almost certainly miss *those* neighbors, when we forget that our first neighbor(s) are in our homes, and the very ones whom we see and know in this sanctuary. *When* we recognize our spouses, our children, our family, our guests in our homes as our neighbor — and when we see each other in this sanctuary with fresh eyes — when we practice mercy *with each other* — then we are cultivating the virtue and habit and judgment of *doing mercy* to anyone we encounter.

Our passage in Luke begins with Martha showing mercy to her neighbor — with Martha opening her home to Jesus. *38 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. But,* as the story progresses, we find that Martha is having a difficult time showing mercy to her own sister, Mary. There is just too much work to be done; too much serving to be done. And Mary, it seems, is getting away with it by spending time at the feet of Jesus, listening to him. Surely, Jesus will intervene and get Mary back to work! There's just too much to be done.

Isn't that always the case? There is always something else to be done. Even if you're not playing whack-a-mole with projects, knocking one down only for a few more to show up, there's still *the list*. That list of things that must be done. That's how it is — at home, and in the church. Each chairperson, each officer, has a list of things to be done — this, then that, then that. And so on. And, of course, it's no different for me, as the pastor.

So, with the piles of things to do, in your homes, in this church, why doesn't Jesus get onto Mary, why doesn't he have her help Martha with all that needs to be done? Why is Martha left to do all the work? When we ask this question in this way, we won't find out why. Because we're asking the wrong question.

Here's the right question: *When will Martha have time for Jesus?* We've already come to terms here that's there's *always* something to do. There's always serving to be done, a project to be done, work to be done. We won't run out of things to do; neither will Martha. So, when will Martha have time for Jesus? Perhaps she thinks, if only Mary would come help for an hour or two, then she would finally be able to sit with Jesus! “Hurry, come help for a while, and then we will have time for *him!*”

Martha's approach seems to be: “let me get this done first, and then I will \_\_\_\_\_.” And I suspect, that this is the approach of many of us, the majority of us, perhaps *all* of us. There's more than enough work to go around. Let me just get this thing done first, and then I will \_\_\_\_\_.

The Lord Jesus Christ — Creator, Ruler, and Judge of the whole universe — is in the home of Martha, and she's *distracted* by serving. She's missing out on the only thing that is worth doing, the only thing that is good and worthwhile, so long as Jesus is there, which is to be in his presence and listen to him. Jesus has come to see Mary and Martha, and Martha has found other things to do!

But, of course, so it is with us, too. In serving as pastor, there are always *many* things to do, many things — even the things that must be done! — that may and do distract me from the main thing — from the Lord Jesus Christ serving me, and from me giving the Lord Jesus all *time* and honor and glory and praise due him. In serving as officers of this congregation, there are always *many* things to do, many things — things that, of course, must be done! — that will chew through time, that will pressure your priorities, that will serve as distractions from *being served by the Lord Jesus Christ*, and from the officers giving all *time* and honor and glory and praise due him. And so it is, too, with all those gathered here in this sanctuary and listening online. There are always necessary things

that must be done, and yet, when those things keep us from *being served* by the Lord Jesus Christ, when those things keep us from bringing all time and glory and honor and praise to God — then those things aren't necessary *enough*. Nothing is more critical, more necessary, more important, more foundational than *having time for Jesus*.

Mary, clearly, loved Jesus. She was in his presence, listening to him, unconcerned by any obligations she may typically have had. Martha also loves Jesus, but her being *distracted* by serving tells us that she is missing out on an opportunity to demonstrate her love, by being in the presence of Jesus, by being served *by him*.

How do we, who are so tempted by distractions, by work, by busyness, by serving — how do we, who are perhaps so inclined to be like Martha, instead be like Mary?

All those who have gathered here are in the presence of God. We encounter God when we gather in his name, which we hear at the very beginning of the service: *in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*. And, this is true whether we think it or not, whether we feel it or not, whether it seems that way or not.

God is present here with us. We have entered his presence; we hear his Word; we eat and drink of his Son. It will do us no good to doubt that he is present with us here, for that would be to doubt our very identity, our namesake, *Emmanuel*. For that is what this Church *means*: “God with us.”

Now think about just how compelling this is. The God of all Creation — the Lord and Judge of the Universe — beckons us to be in his presence. What could keep us from entering here? What could be more compelling than entering the very presence of God? What could be more compelling than hearing what he has to say? What could be more compelling than him *feeding us*?

But so it is. The Lord is here, with us, just as our namesake promises. The Lord is here *serving us*. For the Lord Jesus Christ came not to be served, but *to serve*.

There is another example of God's mercy and service in that ancient story of old — of the three men who visited Abraham — the three men who turn out to be, somehow, *the Lord Himself*.

There Abraham is, in the heat of the day, getting shade — and then — three men are there. Except, Abraham bows down to the ground and says, “O Lord.” The preparations begin. Water for their feet; flour for cakes; a tender and good calf; milk and curds. The Lord is brought a feast. Abraham *has* served the Lord. But what has the Lord brought Abraham and Sarah his wife? For the Lord did not come to be served, but to serve.

News. Good news. Surprising news. Sarah will bring forth a son. Abraham was 99; Sarah 89.

Abraham and Sarah have already lived a rich life, full of blessing because of the Lord. But they had no children together — Ishmael was not Sarah's son. In fact, Ishmael is Abraham's son because it was so obvious to Sarah that she could not have a child at 77, that she wavered from belief and insisted Abraham take her servant to give them a son.

Here we may pause and reflect: How many times have all the children of mankind tried to take things into our own hands? How many times have we wavered in belief?

But still — even though Abraham and Sarah took things into their own hands, God nevertheless poured out his mercy upon both Abraham and Sarah. Sarah becomes a mother at 90. It doesn't matter that she is infertile. God has spoken. Do we not remember what else took place when God spoke? Do we not recall that that is how the whole world sprang forth into being? All that is needed is God's Word — and then we *know* that God will do it.

This is why we trust God is present with us in this sanctuary. God has promised to be, for many more than even two or three are gathered in his name.

Like Mary, we *choose the good portion*, for that will not be taken away from us. Like Mary, we are in the presence of God.

We need not wonder what is in store for this congregation. We need not fear what is on the road to come. We need not worry or become distracted too much about the responsibilities and the list of things that must get done. God is with us. Do we believe that God is with us, or not?

What could be more compelling than being in God's presence — the God of Creation, the Savior of the World, the One who holds the keys to Life and Death, the Judge of the World? Why would go anywhere else? Why wouldn't we come to him?

Still, what is the way forward for this congregation? What course do we set from here on out? Look back at Colossians:

*If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard*

Let us, over the course of this next year, become a people of prayer, united in what we ask for, consistent in what we pray for. Let us pray for families and for children. Let us pray for fruitfulness. Let us pray for these things together, with one voice.

Like Abraham, we have no control over God's timing. God made promises, and Abraham was long kept waiting. But God was not kept waiting — he was fulfilling all things in his way, on his time. God giving a son to Abraham was not only about the joy of a child for Abraham and Sarah, but a blessing for the whole world, the Blessing whom we know as the Lord Jesus Christ, who thousands of years later, was born, in God's time, *in the fullness of time*.

And so, Colossians reminds us what is good and proper for us — *to continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that we have heard*.

We have the gift of life, the gift of forgiveness, and the gift of God's presence — so let us not forsake these gifts, neglect these gifts, avoid these gifts, or stray from these gifts.

We, like our Lord Jesus, are in the business of serving and showing mercy. That is what it means to be Christ's body, the Church, in this world. But the world with its concerns, busyness, desires, temptations, and tasks, threatens to disconnect us, to distract us, to lull us away from God's presence and God's people.

Like Martha, face this question: *When will we have time for Jesus?* But in due time, we may find that our question has changed: *When will we not have time for Jesus?*

And so, year by year, month by month, week by week, day by day, let us *continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel*, entering God's presence, receiving his mercy, being served by him, and bringing him time, honor, glory, and praise.

✝ All Glory be to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.