

SERMON- Proper 11 (C)

Charles R. Cowherd

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalms 15

Colossians 1:15-28

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

July 20th, 2025

Luke 10:38-42

OPENING:

God, someone once provocatively argued, God... if God is anywhere. God... is in the... Kitchen. Not on a mountain, not in church, but in the kitchen. Breaking bread, serving meals, cleaning dishes. Communion, fellowship. God is there.

The kitchen is what connects our two stories—this strange one from the OT and the difficult but familiar one from our Gospel.

There is even a play on words in our story, when Jesus says: “Mary has chosen the better part” as in “the better part of the meal”... “the better cut of the meat.”

The cynic might say that Jesus is the typical man in that reading, like the meme going around the internet, how a man will just fire up the grille and spend hours focused on the entrée and do nothing else for the preparation.

Last week, the Parable of the Good Samaritan was all about loving your *neighbor*, (which is the second part of the Great Commandment)

This week, the story of Martha and Mary, is all about loving *God*, (which is the first part of the Great Commandment)

The Great Commandment, by the way, is “You should love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is the great Law from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, known in Judaism as the *Shema*.

It's a prayer that we often say at 8 AM, and I inserted it this week at 10 AM as well.

The Lectionary, the set schedule of readings that rotates every three years, is up to its old tricks, continuing to work its magic here in our lives at St. Timothy's.

Last week we talked about Father Brad as the Good Samaritan.

This week, as we prepare for his funeral service this afternoon, we are reminded, uncomfortably maybe, that in so doing we also need to attend to spiritual matters.

You might recall this same pair of sisters, Mary and Martha, showing up in John's Gospel, at the “funeral” of their brother Lazarus.

They have so much to teach us in that passage, and in this one.

FUNERALS

I remember once sitting at a funeral planning meeting at my old church, and talking with a family about how there were so many details to be planned but, I was trying to say, that we did not have to figure them all out right then.

One member of the family blurted out: “I actually love the details, I NEED the details. That’s the only thing I can face right now: ‘Which lesson? Which hymn? Which flowers? Which... whatever can focus on... in order to survive my grief.’”

This week the Rundlett family, God bless them, indeed, has offered to pick up the platters for the reception, to put the tables down in Henry Hall, to help clean up after the service.

This is good and natural.

In moments of intense grief: God enables us to ritualize our pain through a variety of methods. God numbs our bodies and souls ... and for good reason.

God is protecting you from the totality of this loss.

We cannot bear it all so we focus on... what we focus on.

This happens, in a different way, at weddings also. How many times have you heard, or maybe experienced it yourself, a couple saying after their wedding: “I wish that I could just have enjoyed it all, that I could have somehow stopped time, take some time to look around and simply be present.”

It's so hard to do so.

Weddings and funerals make us a little bit crazy, maybe it’s our family being there, maybe it’s the importance of the event and the realization of how powerful the rituals are.

CALL:

Jesus, in our lesson today and in our lives, Jesus calls out to us in these moments.

Jesus is not rebuking Martha for scurrying around in the kitchen,

he is calling out to her, in that way that only Jesus can,

in the way that he did on the shores of Galilee,

in the way that he did to Paul on the Damascus Road,

in the way that God has done throughout the ages.

Jesus says her name, importantly, he says it twice:

“Martha, Martha”

Twice, not thrice.

He is not channeling Jan Brady in *The Brady Bunch*: Martha, Martha, Martha.¹
He is saying “Martha, Martha, follow me.”²
He is not naggingly saying “just be more like your sister!”
(I think he knows better than that when dealing with siblings.
Rather Jesus is calling Martha and us, further into discipleship, calling us more deeply into the richness and fullness of LIFE in its entirety.

“Life”, they needed reminding then and we need reminding now, includes the “spiritual life,” which is not opposed to or defined against, the active life. It’s just sometimes neglected or ignored... but it’s all “life.”
Hear me when I say the two are not mutually exclusive, or incapable of inhabiting the same person at the same time.

In other words, we are all “Martha”, we are all “Mary”.

NAMES:

I have been thinking a lot about families and about people’s names recently, and the concept of “Call.” I think it’s because I was on vacation with my extended family, and you look around and everyone has the same name and no one can call each other by the right name.

I have also been thinking about it as I have been spending time with the Rundlett family.

Sociologists say that people named “Dennis” or “Denise” are more likely to become dentists.

People named “Laurence” more likely to become lawyers.

People whose names are “Louis” or “George” are more likely to move to St. Louis and to Georgia.³

For what it’s worth, my name “Charles” just means “man” in Old English or whatever, like the word *churl*: “peasant.”

I do share a first and middle name, “Charles Robison”, with my grandfather, who indeed was an Episcopal priest, ordained 87 years ago, 1938.

I never really knew him, he died when I was young and I only have the faintest of memories of him. Yet here I am.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICVXf8Vznc>

² Collins, Raymond. “Martha.” in Freedman, David Noel, ed. 1992. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. (Vol. 4, K-N) 1st ed. New York: Doubleday, 574

³ Brooks, David. 2012. *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love*. New York: Random House. 208.

My boss at my former church was born on Easter Day, to atheist/agnostic parents. She grew up in that household with religion as an afterthought, only to become an Episcopal Priest. Her name was Christ-ine.

We could play this game forever. The next example I can think of is our seminarian, Ellie... her last name is Singer.

Ellie, as many of you know, has a great voice. She is indeed a “Singer.”

She also is gifted in the production of textiles. She sows. She is not related to the “Singer” sowing family but she actually makes religious vestments.

Ellie’s name and her very self, her ministry, is an example of Martha and Mary together, sowing and singing, loving God and loving our neighbor, all in one person, in all of us. I wish she were here to embarrass in person

Back to the **GOSPEL**

Do you know that an estimated ¼ of the Jewish women in Jesus’ time had the name “Mary”?

Do you know that the name “Mary” means something like “Sorrowful” or “bitter” (like Myrrh?) or “rebellious one”?

That’s a healthy corrective to the serene and pristine depictions of many of the “Marys” in the New Testament and the idea that somehow a focus on the spiritual life leads to passivity or inaction.

The spiritual life is deeply embedded in the physical world, the “real” (quote unquote) world. Another Mary would find that out as “A sword will pierce (her) heart.”

Do you know that the name Martha...poor Martha... simply means “mistress” or “lady” in Aramaic? (I did not know any of this until I looked it up this)

Her name, though, seems to confine her, to imprison her into this gendered role of... providing for... cooking for... cleaning for... and all the rest of those sexist notions.

But, did you know that Mary and Martha are the only women in the Bible that Jesus specifically says that he loves?

Not even Mary Magdalene. Not even Mary of Nazareth,

Did you know then that Mary of Bethany is the only woman singled out in the Bible twice for her devotion to Jesus?⁴

⁴ Collins, Raymond. “Mary of Bethany.” in Freedman, David Noel, ed. 1992. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. (Vol. 4, K-N) 1st ed. New York: Doubleday, 581.

These were Jesus' best friends, they were like family to him.

He knew exactly what to call them. And how to do it.

The point is not to act or be like someone else, rather just get close to Jesus, he will call out to you and help in our imperfections.

CONCLUSION

God calls us by our names. And in a million other ways, to be sure.

God knows us, God has a plan for us. A vocation, a calling, a living.

There are people, as I speak, who are undoubtedly physically in the kitchen right now, busying themselves with the tasks for this afternoon. There are some of you mentally checked out of this sermon, thinking about the same. That's okay. Maybe God is calling you out to go and do God's work in your numbness and in your pain and your furious busy-ness

I will close with this confession.

At some point this week, as we in the church office were preparing the church communications and the bulletins for the funeral, we had Brad's name listed and printed as "Bradley."

His full first name is actually, of course, "Bradford".

We got it changed, thank the Lord.

"Bradford, Bradford"—Jesus called out to our 18th rector. And he answered

What does that name mean? I had to look that one up too, but it's easy.

"Brad" "ford" means "wide river/ broad ford, broad river"

Christ called Bradford Ayers Rundlett into a life of inclusion, acceptance, of action, prayer, of outreach, and of love. Of a spiritual life and a life of action

Jesus is calling this church and each one of us out as well by our names and into our hearts.

AMEN