

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.
Sermon Text: John 11:1-6, 17-27

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA
July 24, 2011

Sermon Title: "Bumblng and Stumbling Toward the Kingdom of God" (Trekking through the Gospel of John)

Martha always gets a bum rap, doesn't she? When we read about Martha in the Gospels, she gets blamed for being the person who does things all wrong.

We know her famous encounter with Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus comes by for a visit.¹ Martha lives with her sister Mary, and when Jesus comes to visit, each sister takes on a certain role. Martha runs about the house making preparations for dinner, while Mary sits quietly at Jesus' feet. Martha slaves away at cooking the bread and serving the meal, while her sister Mary listens attentively to whatever Jesus is teaching. It is Martha that Jesus scolds. Martha is in the wrong – she is the one busying herself over many things, when only one thing was very important at the time. Mary was doing the one important thing: sitting quietly, listening carefully. So when we think of Martha, we think of a woman who doesn't do the right thing. We certainly do not want to

¹ Cf. Luke 10:38-42.

be like her.

We now come in contact with Martha again in the Gospel of John. In Chapter 11, we discover that she lives with Mary in Bethany, a small town that is situated only a few miles southeast of Jerusalem. Both sisters live in the same town as their brother Lazarus, who is deathly ill. Both sisters get on the horn to contact Jesus, to let him know that the one he loves is very sick, and needs Jesus' immediate attention. At least we read in John 11 that Martha does something right by calling for Jesus.

But then we skip down a few verses, and we discover that Lazarus is dead. Jesus doesn't respond to the call to heal him until nearly a week later, but it is too late. When Martha hears that Jesus is finally coming to Bethany, she doesn't wait for him to enter their home as Mary does, but goes right out to him. She walks to the edge of town, and maybe a few yards beyond it, and confronts Jesus on the road. She says in what seems to be an agitated tone, "Lord, if you had been here (like a day or two after we sent word out to you), my brother would not have died." Martha demands a response: her brother is dead, and it didn't have to be that way. Martha is less concerned about sitting at Jesus' feet and listening attentively to him, and more concerned about action. A speedy reply and

a lightning-fast miracle would have done the trick. But Jesus is too late, and the damage is done, and Martha voices her disappointment to her Lord. It seems as though Martha is getting it all wrong again.

However, in her defense, she has a right to be upset. Nobody can take the death of a loved one lightly. Death is serious business. Never seeing somebody ever again is serious business. A person doesn't place a loved one in the grave, and then plan a cruise to the Bahamas the next day. In fact, more cruises have been canceled due to death than have been planned. People are grief-stricken, hurting badly, emotionally drained, physically and mentally worn-out, and they need time to grasp the reality of death.

Martha, understandably, misses her brother. She believes that he could have been saved, and she wishes Jesus would have done something to save him from death. Jesus had his reasons for not coming immediately. Commentaries say that Jesus delayed because he wanted to manifest his glory by raising Lazarus from the dead. "God's timing to accomplish His purpose is perfect."² Jesus Christ has a right to do whatever according to God the Father's will, but for Martha it still hurts. Her brother's death is still

² The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV), 1784.

unbelievable, and very hard to accept. We can understand why Martha takes the initiative to confront Jesus on the road to Bethany.

Like Martha, sometimes we do what is right, and sometimes we do what is wrong. Sometimes we are worrying over many things that are not important. We waste our time on things that hardly need our attention. Sometimes we worry over the right things, and we approach God to request instant results, because we really need God to work in our lives right now. We are not perfect, just as Martha was not. We are working toward perfection with the help of the Holy Spirit, but we still have a long way to go.

But we are working toward perfection: that is what we should always be doing. Constantly moving toward the goal of heaven. Every day striving to be the people God wants us to be, until all our sin is removed, all the pains are gone, and all the work is finished. Whether we “get it right” or foul everything up, we are on the path that God has built for us, and we should never stray from it.

Back in Luke 10, Martha didn't get it right by trying to make up the house in such a way as to impress Jesus. She really did worry over many things, and the wrong things, while Jesus was visiting. At the

very least, though, her heart was in the right place. She was doing what she could for Jesus. She wanted to show she loved him, and respected everything he was doing, although she may have gone about it the wrong way.

We go to John 11, and we find again that Martha's heart was in the right place. She knew what to do when her brother became deathly ill. Call a doctor, yes, but also call Jesus. Make this wonderful, awesome Man aware of what is transpiring, because he has done great works in the name of God the Father. He has already removed illnesses and cast out demons and repaired eyeballs and eardrums. Sure Jesus can perform another great miracle for the one he loves, Lazarus himself.

And once again, her heart is in the right place when she confronts Jesus on the road. Her words, and possibly her posture, might be defensive, but she really wants know why the Man she trusts is late. In her mind, the only scenario was for Jesus to come the next day and heal her brother of his illness, and then everybody could go back to the way things were. This does not happen. We can understand why Martha is upset. We might have been just as upset, or maybe boiling angry. Martha's heart is in the right place. She believes Jesus is a wonderful, awesome Person.

She believes her brother will be taken care of at the end of all things – he will live again, as Martha is sure she will, too.³ She is sure Jesus will make it all happen.

Martha's words reflect many of the words that the psalmist would share with God. If we read the psalms, we will find a boatload of emotions expressed: some of them jubilant, and some of them depressing. Some of those words glorify God, and some of them question God's actions. In Psalm 7 we can read, "O Lord my God, in you I put my trust," and then in Psalm 10 we read, "Why do you stand so far off, O Lord? Why do you hide in times of trouble?" In Psalm 73 it says, "Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart," but we read in Psalm 6, "My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?" The psalmists can praise the Lord with trumpet and harp, they can speak of his mighty works, and tell everybody of God's salvation; and then the psalmists can talk about how their bones are breaking, and their hearts are full of blight and are withering like the grass. "Vindicate me," they cry out, "Save me. Hear my prayers. Don't take all day doing it, though."

The psalmists were moving toward perfection with

³ Cf. John 11:23-24.

the help of God. Each one had his own problem to face, and not all of those problems were easily solved. A prayer may be offered to God, and it might not have been answered within the time limit set by the psalmist. Amid works of hope and praise, there could be words of anger and disappointment. Yet they all were working toward the goal. Bumbling and stumbling, they all looked to God for all the help they could get. Although they might not “get it right,” they believed God’s help would come at the right time.

Every psalm, in which the author expressed words of anger and disappointment, also had words of encouragement, trust, and faith. A psalmist could question when God was going to deliver him and the people from an enemy, and then toward the end say that God remembers his people, and his people can rely on God. Although bones are breaking, God will heal them, the psalmists believed. Although life is ebbing away, God will collect that life and make it new. The psalmists, and even Martha, never let go of that hope. Through the successes and failures, they never let go of God. They believed they were on that pathway toward heaven, and through the thick and thin they could stay on that pathway, never leaving the presence of God. However they felt, no matter what they said, every day they strived to be the people God wants us

to be, until all our sin is removed, all the pains are gone, and all the work is finished.

There is one more thing that Martha doesn't get right, but Jesus soon corrects her. As much as she trusts Jesus to do anything, she doesn't necessarily believe that he can do anything more for her brother. He is dead. What's done is done – there is no going back from death. Martha believes that her brother will live again, but in some distant future. He will have life once again at that point, but for now he occupies a grave.

Jesus corrects her thinking. Martha's brother won't just have life later on – he will have life now. “I am the Resurrection,” Jesus says. “I am the Life.” This goes way back to John 1, in which we learned that “all things were made through Christ, and without him nothing was made that was made.”⁴ Nothing exists without Jesus Christ. Nothing moves forward without Jesus Christ. And, through Jesus Christ, all things have life. Martha's brother will have life, and have it today, Jesus says. There is no more death here. There is no death for those who believe in Christ.

We are making our way toward perfection, even

⁴ John 1:3.

though we may progress forward more awkwardly than flawlessly. Sometimes when we stumble, we may think we have missed an opportunity that will never show itself again. We may feel we have wasted precious time, and there is nothing more to do but pout and complain and give up. Jesus says to us, "I am the Resurrection and the Life *today*." There is no end of things but the continuation of things. There may be some missed opportunities, but through Christ there are more opportunities on the horizon that are ready to reveal themselves to us.

I read the story about a guy named Henry who just couldn't get it right. He lived in Brooklyn with his alcoholic father and submissive mother and four other brothers. They lived amid poverty, but Henry's mother and father tried to teach the children right from wrong. When the father died of his addictive illness, Henry decided to take control of his own life, which meant he did everything his father (and mother) didn't want him to do. He robbed businesses of money, he robbed people at gun-point of whatever they had, he sold drugs, he took drugs. He lived the gangster's life, making more money in a week than we could imagine.

Before all of this, though, Henry had confessed Jesus Christ as his Savior. He had accepted the Holy Spirit into his life. Somebody said he would be a

preacher some day. But he didn't get it right. He stole instead of gave, like Jesus did. He ran from God instead of lived for him, like Jesus did. Henry spent time in jail. He had drug dealers coming after him for money. Henry was hopped up on drugs himself. He would come back to Jesus Christ, and then leave. Come back and leave. The running finally stopped one day. He got himself cleaned up from the drugs and the crime. He served a church as a janitor, then as a member, then as a deacon, then as a pastor. It took moving his family from New York to Detroit, and it took him fighting the old demons of money and drugs. But he was finally "getting it right" with God's help. There were missed opportunities, but through Christ there were more opportunities on the horizon that were revealed to Henry. And he grabbed on to them, just like Martha did, just like we do.

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not done with us yet. There is still more to do within us. No matter how we travel on the path – on our feet, on our knee, or on our bellies – nothing can stop the Lord from working perfection through us, not even death.