

Martha, Martha, Chill!

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This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! One year ago today I preached my first sermon here. The Reverend Kim Fields was gracious enough to line up a couple of ministers prior to my getting here. Walt did the first Sunday, Gerry did the second one and I did the third one. So however you count it, I have been here a year now. And I want to officially welcome back home the Reverend Kim Fields and his wife, Lorraine. Welcome back! And I met with Kim this week and we made it really clear that he can do as much or as little as he wants.

I'm going to read a passage of scripture for you from the book of Luke, chapter 10, beginning with verse 38, one of the classic New Testament stories.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, they came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" The Lord said, "Martha, Martha, chill! You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." May God bless the reading of His Word.

A long, long time ago in a land far, far away, I was completing the second year at my very first church. And every time I think about them, I smile and cringe at the same time. I smile because there's no two-and-a-half-year period of my life where I learned more than the two-and-a-half years I spent with them. Period. End of discussion. The reason for that is, when I got there, I knew absolutely nothing. When they called me to be their minister, quite literally I had never served on a committee in a church. I was beyond green and they taught me a lot. I loved them. They loved me. We had a great ministry together. I was concluding my second year there, but we had an issue. And I need to explain this for those of you who have not lived in the Deep South. Now, how many here have spent a significant amount of time in the Deep South? Let's see your hands. Well, there's a few of you. There's a few of you. But for those of you who haven't, in the olden days and the days of single-paned windows, about every four years you had to strip the paint and repaint. The reason for that was for most of the year there was so much humidity and condensation, the water would condense on the inside of the windows and run down in sheets. And if you weren't there to mop it up, it would quite literally pool up and run down the wall onto the floor. And if you weren't there to take care of it on a regular basis, and if you didn't take care of your window seals, your window seals would rot out. Well, in this little church there wasn't anybody there to take care of the condensation most of the week, and by my second year there the window seals had gotten spongy and they had to be replaced. And so somebody said, "Well, if we're going to replace the window seals, we might as well go ahead and replace the windows." You see, they were just single-paned windows and we had these hideous curtains over the windows that were at least 30 years old. They had been washed. They were fairly clean, but they were very ratty. And somebody said, "Well, let's check on stained glass." We did. My memory says there were only six little windows in this little building. And what we found out was, the stained glass would cost more than the building was worth. This

was just a basic building. We did not have indoor plumbing. We did have a bathroom and it had a flush toilet. But it was a block building out under the oak tree behind the church. And if you went out there, you better be careful of the snakes outside and inside, including inside the toilet. Ask me how I know! Anyway, we decided no stained glass. And somebody suggested plexiglass. So we checked on plexiglass. Turns out we could afford plexiglass and plexiglass doesn't sweat as much as regular glass. And then they said, "Well, Pastor," (they called me Preacher), "Preacher, what color plexiglass should we put in our windows?" Now, you know this is not going to end well because at that point in my ministry, I had not learned that I did not have to be an interior decorator to be a pastor. And I had not learned at that point in my ministry that "I don't know" is a valid answer for a pastor to have. I was the pastor. I was supposed to have an answer, and so this was my answer: I said, "Well, my favorite color is red. So, let's put red plexiglass windows in the church." And they said, "Well, the pastor wants red plexiglass windows. We will put red plexiglass windows in the church." And they did. The fateful day came for them to be installed. They were installed and when you got up close to them and looked, you could tell they were red. But if you were standing out at the road looking at them, they looked black. Now, imagine being a visitor and pulling up in front of a church that has black windows. Is that inviting? Do you wonder what they're doing in there? Then Sunday arrived, and Sunday morning was fine. The hideous curtains were gone. The windows didn't look too bad on the inside. There wasn't streams of light coming in between the gaps in the curtain, so it was good. But then Sunday night arrived. And when we arrived, the sun was shining at an angle through the plexiglass windows on one side. And there was a reflection, a red reflection, off of the gold piled carpet, and it looked like the fires of hell were eating their way through the floor and consuming the pews. And the only sermon that would be fitting for that situation was: "Red Light on the Way to Hell." It was hideous, y'all, it was absolutely hideous. And the next Sunday, those hideous curtains were back.

Oh, mistakes I have made in ministry! I guess that's why I have a great deal of patience and tolerance and forgiveness for people who mess up trying to do the right thing. Have you ever done the right thing at the wrong time? Have you ever done the right thing the wrong way? Have you ever given somebody something that you would need under those circumstances, only to find out that's exactly what they didn't need under those circumstances? We've all experienced that and most of us have done that. And that is what's going on in our passage. The story of Mary and Martha and Jesus is one of the classics of the New Testament. If you read the New Testament account of the life of Jesus, very often, anytime he had a significant event coming up, he would go off by himself and pray or he would go off with a couple of his guys and they would pray as he prepared his heart and mind for whatever was coming up. At this point in his life, he is on his way to Jerusalem for the last time for his showdown with the religious leaders. And he had told his disciples very plainly, "They're going to kill me." Mary and Martha's home was in Bethany, which is two miles outside of Jerusalem, and their home was his home away from home. He loved them and they loved him. And when he was there, that's where he stayed. He went to Mary and Martha's to get away from the hustle and bustle of the crowds. He went there to get some peace and quiet. He went there to be with people that he loved as he prepared his heart and mind for the ordeal that was ahead. There's absolutely no doubt that Martha loved Jesus with a passion. And when he arrived, she wanted to be a good host. It was important to her that she put on a good spread for Jesus and those that were traveling with him. It was important to her to give him her very best. Now, imagine this: Jesus traveled with a company of folks, not just by himself. Now imagine that at four o'clock in the afternoon, unannounced, fifteen people

arrive at your house for dinner. And these are people you actually like and you want to do something special for them. I can only imagine. I would go into absolute overdrive. And so, Martha is hustling and bustling around trying to get things done. And Mary is sitting there. She's just sitting and listening. I can imagine Martha going to Jesus and saying, "Jesus, Lord, Master, I love you. But would you tell Mary to help me?" And Jesus' response is: "Martha, chill!" Mary, on the other hand, had sensed what Jesus really needed. There is no doubt that Mary also loved Jesus with a passion. Jesus needed peace and quiet and someone just to listen as he prepared for what was coming. A very simple meal, not a feast, would be plenty. What he needed was a simple meal, peace and quiet, and people who loved him to sit quietly with him as he prepared for the ordeal to come. Mary sensed that and tried to give him exactly what he needed at that moment.

Now, drive a peg down, hold on to it. We'll be back in a few moments. Two pillars of Wesleyan theology are personal piety and social justice. Personal piety is a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It takes prayer. It takes study. It takes meditation. It is a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ that issues forth in social justice. Social justice is an active loving of those for whom Jesus died. They are both necessary. They are both part of the Christian existence. They are both part of the Christian life. They are both important. We must have that personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ that comes only through a personal time with Him in reflection, in prayer, in study, in meditation. But equally necessary is social justice and action: the feeding of the hungry, the clothing of the naked, the housing of the homeless, the visiting of the sick, the going to the nursing homes and those who are homebound. Both of those are absolutely necessary: action and contemplation. Martha was the action person. You need a church full of action people to get things done. You were saved not just for fire insurance. You were saved to serve. Jesus said, "I did not come to be served but to serve, and give my life a ransom for many." And if that's what Jesus did, that's our task as well. That is built on a foundation of contemplation, built on a foundation of personal relationship with God. Both are important. Individuals and churches get in trouble when they overemphasize one to the exclusion of the other. Churches get in trouble when they practice what is affectionately called social gospel, enamored with the doing and the serving, and neglecting the personal relationship with God. And there are others who get in trouble when they become so heavenly minded that they're no earthly good. One without the other produces unhealthy Christians and unhealthy churches. The key is figuring out the balance. We need Marys. We need Marthas. And we need those elements in our lives and in our churches. The key is figuring out a balance. Our temperaments tend to weigh us one way or another and that's just fine. But if you're weighed one way or another, you must be intentional about not neglecting the other aspect. The same thing is true about churches: figuring out a balance. And right here is what keeps me up at night.

This generation has been through something that no living generation has been through. It's changed us. It's altered us. The gospel is still the gospel. The message is still the same. The conveyance must change or at least be altered. What type of balance must we have? You achieve balance by trial and error. Trial and error. And I want to say very loudly and I want to say very clearly: It is okay to fail, trying to do the right thing. It's okay to fail, trying to do the right thing. This year we are going to do some failing. Alright? And it's okay. It's not okay not to try. Did y'all hear that? It's not okay not to try. We're going to try. We're going to do some failing. But, hopefully and prayerfully, we're going to do some succeeding as well. The only time you truly fail is when you fail

to try. So, we're going to do our very best to try to figure out a balance. We cannot give our society, our community, this generation, exactly what we have in the past. They have been changed. We've got to figure out how to convey things. Now, I am a dyed-in-the-wool, self-professed, technological dinosaur. That is who I am and I intend to die that way. Okay? But I know that I know that I know that technology is the wave of the future. I know that we must embrace it in order to reach this generation. I know that we must master it. That's why we have QR codes for everything. And I was looking around and some of you got plumb giddy as Pastor Aaron talked about QR codes and being able to find the scripture and all that kind of stuff with your QR code. I have a paper! This is what works for me. But this QR code might be what works for our generation. If it is, we've got to embrace it. We must figure out what is needed now, because this generation sees relationships and community differently. So, as individuals and as a congregation, we must embrace forgiveness, tolerance and patience with ourselves and with one another. I don't know if you guys got this or not, but Aaron was doing a Star Trek thing with this device (a communicator.) Some people didn't get that. I got it, though. I'm a Trekkie.

As we go into a brave new future, as we move into a brave new future, patience, tolerance and forgiveness must be a part of who we are as we try and succeed and fail to reach our community, our world, with the gospel. So, let's make some mistakes together! You ready? Just do not let me pick out any colors! Let's pray.

Lord, we admit, we know, we claim, that we are facing things as individuals and as churches that we have never faced before. We need the Spirit's help and guidance. We need Your hand at work in our lives. God, help us to sense and feel and perceive the proper balance. Help us to know what the people we are trying so hard to reach need. Help us to be able to deliver that in a manner that is pleasing to You and effective for them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.