



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT  
MY HEART AS SANCTUARY, MY LIFE AS PRAYER

## What Do We Love More Than Ourselves? Genesis 18:1-15; Luke 10:38-42

I don't know whether to cry for Martha or laugh for her. You and I both know what it is like to be working on something which you basically want to do all by yourself because no one else can do it quite as well as you can. Okay, you could use a little extra help with some rather mundane aspect of the project but, if you are honest, you have too much pride to ask for help and besides, that certain someone who OUGHT to be offering to help anyway is just being lazy as usual and is doing nothing productive at all but watching TV, reading a book, gazing at butterflies, or listening to Jesus! I'll just do it myself!

Should we cry for Martha or laugh for her—or for ourselves for that matter?

We laugh because we have been there before. We cry because Martha is missing out. I don't mean that she is missing out on hearing what Jesus is saying. Martha is a multitasker par excellence. Don't think for a moment that she can't cook a roast, bake biscuits from scratch, set the table, make gravy, frost a cake, and hear every word Jesus is saying all at once! Without question, Martha could use Mary's help, but that is not Martha's problem and Jesus knows it. Mary is doing what she enjoys which is talking to Jesus and his closest disciples. Martha is also doing the things she likes most—except she will not allow herself to enjoy it.

We all have plenty of reasons not to enjoy a particular day or week or season of life. Tough times come to us all. Painful experiences happen. Difficult and stressful times move in and set up camp. Maybe Martha was having one of those days.

Maybe so, but we all know people who are living through excruciating circumstances—health concerns are overwhelming, things at work are getting worse by the day, family and personal issues explode on all sides. Everything in life feels like it is going wrong, but some people are living through it all. They are not merely existing but are living each day as best they can. Somehow they do not allow their circumstances to prevent them from living day by day.

I don't think Martha is that kind of person, however, at least not yet. She may keep moving and doing, but she is not living.

During this Lenten season, we have thought together about our heart as sanctuary, our life as prayer. What does it mean for us to meet God in our hearts? What does it mean for our lives to become living prayers? For several weeks words from the Old and New Testaments have challenged us to love God with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength and our neighbor as ourself. We have asked ourselves some very difficult questions:

What do we love more than Jesus?

What do we love more than our neighbor?

Today, perhaps with Martha, we ask ourselves, "What do we love more than ourselves?"

I wonder if Martha didn't love the rush of activity required for a nice dinner party more than she enjoyed the experience of the meal itself. I wonder if she loved the attention she received by doing all the work herself more than she enjoyed having Jesus and his friends in her home. I wonder if Martha didn't love the stress from the frustration with her sister more than she would actually enjoy doing something with Mary. I wonder if Martha thought she did not belong in that room with everyone else. Did she think it was inappropriate to be discussing scripture with men? Certainly that was a prevailing attitude of the time, one which Mary was bold enough to ignore. Was she afraid she would embarrass herself if someone asked her a question? Was she jealous of Mary for the ease with which she related to Jesus and all of the amazing things he did?

My mom was a wonderful cook and loved having everyone at home around her table. She would plan for family feasts weeks in advance. She made lists, cooked ahead, and savored the day to come. On ordinary days, she could open the refrigerator door, pull out whatever she found, and create an amazing meal for whomever sat down at the table. She loved cooking because she loved cooking for other people. It was her gift and she loved to share it. She never complained about all the work involved in a large family dinner and she made the work appealing to others. She never had to ask for help. It was always offered.

Martha does not seem to enjoy what she is doing. It even appears as if the preparation of the meal is more important than the people who will enjoy the meal. Martha causes us to ask what we love more than ourselves because we are suspicious that she might have quite a few answers to that question.

Jesus was in Martha's home because she and her sister and brother, Mary and Lazarus, were special to Jesus. He loved them. The first thing we and Martha need to realize is that we are lovable. We are loved.

In fact, this point is the very premise of Scripture. God created the world and wanted to share it with a creature to whom God could relate. Humanity was born, filled with God's breath, made in God's image. Love was the energy of creation and love was the purpose and end result. Jesus himself explained to Nicodemus that he had come because of God's love for humanity: "For God so loved the world," he said, "that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life" (John 3:16).

We are lovable. God loves us and gives us life. God loves us for who we are—his children—not because of what we do. Likewise, we ought to love what God loves, but we do not always love this creation, do we? We do not always believe we are worthy of God's love.

We are not alone. When you read through the story of God's relationship with us humans, it is difficult to find anyone who seems worthy of God's love. We are told that Adam and Eve had everything they could possibly want in the Garden; yet, they did not trust that God wanted the very best for them. They learned to distrust God and to betray God. Nevertheless, God loved them and provided for them.

Abraham was an eager explorer but a reluctant husband. On two separate occasions, he told Pharaoh and a tribal king that Sarah was his sister. In truth she was his half sister, but that was only half the truth for she was fully his wife. He was more afraid for his life than he was for his wife. Abraham bartered with God and tested God's patience. He almost sacrificed his son to appease God. Still, God chose Abraham to be the father of the Hebrew people. He loved Abraham.

Isaac, Abraham and Sarah's son of promise, was gullible and easily cheated out of blessings. He did very little to help realize the promise. Jacob,

Isaac's second son, was a scoundrel who would trick you in a heartbeat. His twelfth son Joseph took advantage of his father and brothers and lauded it over them. While he saved Egypt from a devastating famine, he also enabled Pharaoh to exploit his people for land and money.

Moses murdered an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew. He ran away and when God called him to go back and free his people, Moses struggled with trusting God and acting on what God asked of him. I could go on and on naming people who are prominent in the story of our faith who were not always faithful or confident but whom God loved anyway. God created us as lovable. We are God's beloved!

God loves us, not in spite of who we are but because of who we are. God knows we need his love. We also need our own love. If we cannot love ourselves, scripture suggests, we cannot truly love God or one another.

Loving ourselves is not always easy. Each one of us can come up with a list of reasons that we are not lovable, that we do not measure up. Even the people who appear to love themselves above all else, really don't. They are often afraid that if the rest of the world sees them for who they truly are, no one will like them at all. I suspect that is a fear we all share.

Learning to love ourselves can be frightening. It is certainly risky and makes us vulnerable. Our task might be made easier if, instead of focusing on ourselves, we looked first for God within us.<sup>1</sup>

Heidi Grogan, a social justice advocate, reminds us that we are often like the queen in the fairy tale "Snow White." We do not like what we see in the mirror and are constantly judging ourselves against a standard that is impossible to achieve. She suggests that we follow the example of Clare of Assisi, a thirteenth century woman of faith who challenged the social norms of her time and chose a life of simplicity and service. In order to become who God wanted her to be, Clare looked into what she called "the mirror of the crucified Christ." She learned to see herself as Christ saw her. The One who gave his life so that she might have life was a more authentic reflection of her true self than was the culture into which she was born.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Johnny Sears, "Waking Up To Our Whole Heart," *Weavings* (November/December 2015, January 2016), 11.

<sup>2</sup>Heidi Grogan, "A Sacred Seeing," *Weavings* (November/December 2015, January 2016), 38-39.

Johnny Sears, whose life work is helping people mature spiritually, explains that our culture is generally against the self-love God engenders. We are never smart enough, well-connected enough, wealthy enough, or good looking enough for the world.<sup>3</sup> We do not have to judge ourselves by fabricated standards, however. A few years ago, *Time* magazine carried a story about eight female celebrities who protested the ways in which photographs of them were photoshopped for publication.<sup>4</sup> They did not want you and me to see idealized images of them. They preferred that we see them as they are—as we all are.

If we look for what God sees and try to find where God is within us, surely we will find goodness and beauty and honesty. What God loves in us is not necessarily what the world will love. Granted, God does not like all that he finds within us. Those aspects of our lives that are sinful—including the poor self-image we may have of ourselves—must be changed, but we look for guidance to God who loves us rather than listening to the culture around us which will exploit us. God will help us to love ourselves completely as we grow into the person God created us to be.

There is an *American Idol* ad currently running that I have to applaud. Images of some of the current contestants vying for a shot at a musical career appear and voices of the three judges say things like: “If you have ever been told that you are not talented enough, that you’re too shy or too young, that you do not sing well; if you feel that you don’t fit into the crowd because you stand out in the crowd; if you have heard that you are different and that is not good, then this is your time.” Those are messages we all need to hear because we are all different. We all have unique gifts and abilities, ideas and dreams, looks and perspectives. That is what makes our world so amazing and beautiful. That is how God created us! We need to love who God created us to be!

Think about Abraham’s wife Sarah. Should we laugh or cry with her? In her culture and time, she was considered a failure because she had not managed to do the one thing required of a wife which was to produce a male heir. When told that God would make that dream happen, Sarah and Abraham both laughed at the absurdity of the idea of two people whose bodies and hopes were shriveling up day by day could have a child. When

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<sup>3</sup>Sears.

<sup>4</sup>Eliana Dockterman, “Keira Knightly and 7 Other Celebs Who Protested Photoshop and Won,” *Time* (November 7, 2014), as cited in John Van De Laar, “A Body to Love For: Nurturing a Body-Loving Spirit,” *Weavings* (November/December 2015, January 2016), 15.

their son was born, however, in celebration they named him Isaac which means “laughter.” Sarah and Abraham managed to laugh at their circumstance and then delight in their good fortune. I suspect God laughed, too.

Earlier our choir sang the beautiful spiritual “Steal Away to Jesus.” On the surface, the spirit song speaks of that time when we will all slip away to be with Jesus in heaven and nothing can delay that glorious day. However, there were likely times when slaves sang that song as a signal to one another that someone was slipping away to freedom that night or everyone was going to rendezvous in a secret location for a meeting or prayer service. “Steal Away to Jesus” might mean receiving the eternal freedom that death brings. It could also mean actual freedom on this earth.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps we should all “steal away” from the negative thoughts we have about ourselves and the confining messages that we receive every day from a culture that would seek to define us rather than be defined by us. We could steal away to the freedom of discovering how to love ourselves as God loves us. If there is something about ourselves we do not like, we can look into the mirror of Christ’s love and see whether or not that aspect of our lives is of God or not. If not, then it needs to be changed. If so, then we celebrate who God created us to be.

We are the beloved. God loves us—and so should we. There are a lot of things we learn to love before we learn to love ourselves. If God loves us first, however, how can we do anything other? God loves you and me because we are God’s children. Let us steal away from the messages that distort what God is doing within us and find true freedom in the love of God which redeems so that we might fully love God and one another. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup>Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 84.

March 18, 2018

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How easy it would be, O God, if visitors would come to us and communicate your messages directly to us. Then we would listen and respond. Perhaps you have already done that and are now calling us to pay attention to your messages to us. Help us to listen, O God.

As we continue this Lenten journey, we pray that you will bring us insights during times of prayer and reflection as well as during work and play. Help us to recognize your creativity in all that we do, your compassion in all that we feel, and your grace in everything we experience.

At times, O God, we feel besieged by illness. It seems that at every turn a loved one, a friend, or an acquaintance is telling us of a new illness or disease that has reared its ugly head. We look to you to guide us to the proper physicians and the best treatments. We pray that you will use these resources to help us and others get well. We beg for your grace and your nearness . . .and we know that these gifts are already ours.

There are also times, O God, when life seems to ebb from us. Busyness, responsibilities, challenges, routines, and doubts drain the joy from our lives and leave us feeling empty and incomplete. Help us to focus upon Christ who can help stop the hemorrhage of self-confidence and assurance of your love. Help us to look upon Christ in whom we find our true worth and purpose.

There are times, O God, when we do not even like ourselves. Open our hearts to see ourselves honestly, the good and the not-so-good, and reveal to us your love for us. Save us from self-neglect, O God.

Thank you, Lord, for loving us in the patient yet firm manner which is yours. Thank you for teaching us about what matters most in life and how we can regain the joy you intend for us all. Thank you for redeeming us from ourselves as well as from the challenges and dangers of the world. Thank you for restoring us to life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.