



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **A Space Into Which Belief Can Flood**

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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Belief Can Flood**

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*Colossians 1:15-23, 2:6-7*

*Luke 10:38-42*

One of the joys of the Interim Ministry is, of course, the wonderful people in all the churches, but also the church itself, such a variety of architecture: contemporary, historical, traditional.

One church I served had been in the same building since its founding, nearly 200 years. Another had been in four different buildings in a little over 100 years.

Like the children's song: Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors...And that's it, isn't it? Who is here? What happens when you open the doors in this space, with these people?

We live Paul's words to the Colossians...how all of us are coming together in this space to remind ourselves of our life in Christ; just who is Jesus and what does he mean for your life?

Nancy Mairs, who describes herself as a lapsed Catholic, writes in her memoirs Ordinary Time about her return to church.

She said that, even though her beliefs about God were uncertain, that she began attending mass again to prepare “a space into which belief could flood.”

I like that as a description of what any church space is, but also the faith space of our own life.

A space into which belief can flood...

That seems to describe the scene in our gospel lesson. Jesus has come for a visit...the sisters, Mary and Martha, have received him into their home, into their space and look what happens.

They bring him into the living room...Martha is rushing about, bringing him something to drink, making sure the snacks are fresh, and Mary, Mary just sits on the sofa listening to Jesus tell stories.

Martha makes sure the chicken casserole is hot...Mary sits and listens...Martha checks to make sure the bread is in the oven...Mary sits and listens...Martha mutters to herself about the table being set and getting the drink orders...

Mary laughs at Jesus' stories of a camel going through the eye of a needle and prodigal sons in a pig sty and such stuff.

As a reader of Luke's gospel (Luke is the only one who tells us of this particular visit by Jesus to Mary and Martha's house) I must admit some confusion when Jesus says, "There is need of only one thing."

Because just before this story is the story of the Good Samaritan who does a lot of work taking care of somebody else, of back and forth making sure all is well, and Jesus ends that story saying, "Go and do likewise!"

And here is Martha, who is going and doing and doing and going, caring for Jesus, no telling who else was there for supper, and food just doesn't magically appear on the table, somebody has to go and do likewise, but Jesus doesn't say that.

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Jesus says, “Martha, you’re fussing way too much, getting worked up over nothing. There is need of only one thing, and Mary has chosen the better portion...”

What do you think the ‘one thing’ is?

If the ‘one thing needful’ is sitting at the feet of Jesus, then what do you with the story of the Good Samaritan “to go and do...”?

And just before that story is the story where Jesus sends out the 70, telling them that the harvest is plentiful, asking the Lord to send more laborers to reap the harvest.

But if the ‘one thing needful’ is going and doing for others who need help, then what do you with Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, having chosen the good portion?

What do you think the ‘one thing’ is?

I think when Jesus tells Martha that ‘there is need of only one thing,’ I think Jesus is telling Martha what he needs.

I think Jesus is telling Martha what he needs.

Maybe you grew up in a Martha family like me ...my grandmother Lancaster was a kitchen person...she had Sunday dinner at her house once a month...there was time when all six of her children and their families lived within an hour of her home... about 30 people every second Sunday.

The grandchildren all in the kitchen, the adults around the dining room table, except for my grandmother who was in and out...more fried chicken, more rice and gravy, more cornbread... I’ve still got about 20 lbs. of that ‘more’ on me!

I say she's like Martha, but there was part of her that helps me understand Mary. Rabbi Marc Gellman gave me the insight for this several years ago.

Rabbi Gellman told of his grandmother Sarah, and he said that the two of them agreed on something very special. He said they both agreed that he, Marc Gellman, was the most important person in the world!

He was her first grandchild, and nobody, nothing was more important to her. He said that he never could understand why anybody would disagree with that! As my Grandmother Lancaster's first grandchild, I understand and agree 100% with what he says!

But let me say, my grandmother could make everyone feel that way, that you were the most important person in the world; 19 grandchildren and she never asked for a Christmas list and got you exactly what you wanted!

Because you were the most important person in the world to her, and you knew it.

Jesus knew that he was the most important person in Mary's life.

Because look at how Luke, the good storyteller he is, describes Martha as worried and distracted, and then to make sure we get the point, he has Jesus say it, "Martha, you're worried and distracted..."

It's not the going and doing; it's the worry and distraction about all of it. The Martha in us can get so distracted by what has been; we get so worried about what will be; and that's

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true for all of us in this world in which faith comes hard and people find it difficult to raise their eyes above the horizon of their own survival.

But there is the Mary in us giving Jesus that space into which belief can flood, into which faith can flourish, and through which redemption and salvation give meaning to our lives, and bear the fruit of justice and peace in our world.

Our focus on who he is breaks through the rhetoric of fear and anger and lies and self-righteousness that tries to distract us from his fresh word of creation and reconciliation and hospitality.

As Pope Francis challenged us a few years ago when he spoke about our dangerous world: *Our response must instead be one of hope and healing, of peace and justice. We are asked to summon the courage and the intelligence...Our efforts must aim at restoring hope, righting wrongs, maintaining commitments, and thus promoting the well-being of individuals and of peoples.*

Yes, Jesus came to give us life after death; but more importantly, he came to give us life after birth. Jesus came to make us bold, not cautious; faithful, not fearful; devoted, not distracted.

Again, in the words of Pope Francis: *We must move forward together, as one, in a renewed spirit of fraternity and solidarity, cooperating generously for the common good.*

As we think about moving forward into the future as this church, as we think about our own lives as we reach for tomorrow: isn't that where we need to begin...preparing that space into which belief can flood...a faith which faces every



challenge with humility and meets every need with loving generosity...faith which is honest and open and never afraid to take the first step into love.

The one thing needful.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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