Palm Sunday, April 4, 1982
MARTHA AND PALM SUNDAY
Luke 10:38-42; Mark 11:1-11

Jesus Christ was often the guest in the homes of individuals and families. Luke tells us that when Jesus came to the village of Bethany, a certain woman named Martha, welcomed him into her home. Martha had a sister named Mary, and a brother named Lazarus. This home became Jesus' headquarters whenever he was in Bethany, which is a small town near Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus probably stayed in Bethany the Saturday night before Palm Sunday and returned there the evening of Palm Sunday. No doubt he was staying in Martha's home.

When you passed through the doorway of the old house in Bethany, you entered Martha's world. She knew little and cared less about the rise and fall of time and life beyond those friendly familiar walls. Nearly all her years had been spent beneath that roof.

The little house in Bethany was Martha's world. She could not understand why it was not enough for her sister, Mary. She found it hard to see that there might be another way.

From what we know about Martha, she would be described today as a "Type A person." And if she persisted in her behavior and attitude, she would be a prime candidate for a heart attack. As most of you probably know, the basic research on "Type A" behavior and the story behind it is contained in a book entitled, "TYPE A BEHAVIOR AND YOUR HEART," by Meyer Friedman, M.D. and Ray H. Rosenman, M.D.

After more than 30 years of studying coronary heart disease in the consultation room, at the hospital bedside and in the laboratory, some physicians are convinced that even though formation about what to eat, we have been given in about exercise, about the dangers of smoking, we have been denied the most important information of all — the facts about what may be the major cause of premature coronary heart disease. Meyer and Rosenman have for lack of a better name, called this "Type A" personality or behavior.

What is Type A behavior? According to the researchers, "It is a particular complex of personality traits, including excessive competitive drive, aggressiveness, impatience and a compelling sense of time urgency. Individuals displaying this pattern seem to be engaged in a chronic, ceaseless, and often fruitless struggle with themselves, with others, with circumstances, with time, sometimes with life itself. They also exhibit a free-floating, but well rationalized form of hostility, and almost always a deep-seated insecurity."

I think this modern-day description fits Martha as she is described in Luke's Gospel. She was overly aggressive and extremely impatient. She was what we would call fussy and a worrier. Luke describes her as being distracted with much serving. She was going in all directions at once, hurrying around as if the world would come to an end if she didn't get the food ready by her own deadline.

The person with Type B behavior and personality is exactly the opposite. She or he is rarely driven by desires to keep obtaining a wildly increasing number of things or to participate in an endlessly growing series of events in an ever-decreasing amount of time. The Type B person is able to take time to relax without feeling guilty. She is willing and able to learn new things.

It's not a matter of intelligence this being Type A or Type B. And Type B's ambition may be as great or even stronger than that of Type A. Type B may also have a considerable amount of drive and energy, but the character of that energy is such that it seems to steady the person, to give confidence and security, rather than to goad, irritate, and infuriate as with the Type A person. According to the New Testament accounts of the life, personality, and behavior of Jesus, he was most certainly Type B.

Not only was he Type B, but we can see from the story of Martha, that he wanted her to become Type B also. "Martha," he said, "You are overly anxious and worried about too many trivial things. You are always in a hurry. You are always busy. Take some time to relax. Be more trusting toward God and toward life. Take some time out for fun. Do not be anxious about tomorrow, or about the next meal, or about whether your house is perfectly clean and neat when I come to visit."

Not only was Martha bustling about the kitchen while Jesus was her guest, but she complained to him that her sister was not helping her.

I suppose most of us if we are honest with ourselves, sympathize and identify with Martha. We might think that she was justified in her complaint to Jesus. But let's not be too hasty with our sympathy. Sometimes we use busyness to escape asking and probing deeper questions. The problem is that one day our busyness will come to an end and then we may find life empty indeed.

Furthermore, if we are always too busy, then like Martha we begin to complain because others do not have our enthu-siasm for what we are so busily engaged in. Type A people tend to want others to be Type A also. Type A people, like Martha, tend to find their identity in their busyness, in their roles, or in their jobs. And that's not a very secure identity.

Incidentally, whether one is Type A like Martha or Type B like Jesus and Mary, has nothing to do with a person's economic condition or kind of job or profession or whether or not a person is a success in his or her chosen field. Nor is it true that a Type A person accomplishes more than Type B. There is no evidence that Martha accomplished more than Mary.

Jesus wanted Martha to slow down a bit — to take time out to enjoy people, to think, to understand. A certain rhythm and change of pace are necessary in life. Jesus himself took regular time off for worship and prayer. He knew how to relax. He had no problem taking time out from a busy schedule to eat a meal with a sinner like Zacchaeus, while most of those around him wondered why he was wasting his time with such a useless person.

He took time out for children. His disciples on the other hand, thought that too was a waste of time. They wanted to hurry him on to what they thought were more important things.

I said earlier that Jesus probably stayed at Martha's home the Saturday night before going to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We do not know if Martha was in the crowd that accompanied Jesus that Palm Sunday. It's logical to assume however that she didn't. If Martha was still prisoner of her Type A behavior, she no doubt stayed at home, not believing she had time for the trip to Jerusalem. It was the beginning of the Feast of the Passover — a time of celebrating and taking time off from the usual round of activities. Type A people have difficulty in doing this. They don't have time for fun and relaxation. Probably not too many Martha's in that Palm Sunday crowd.

There were some Martha types standing on the sidelines, not taking part in the celebration, but rather criticizing what was going on. They told Jesus to quiet the crowd. They didn't like all of this celebrating and wasting of time.

Jesus, on the other hand, liked the celebration even though he had no illusions about the source or the extent of the crowd's enthusiasm. He knew that for the most part it was misguided and would be short-lived.

Being misunderstood and misinterpreted was nothing new to Jesus. Even his disciples often did not understand what he was about. When he spoke of victory, they thought of victory in battle, but he was speaking of triumphant living. When he spoke of liberty, many thought only of political liberty, escape from the yoke of Rome. But Jesus went beyond that — "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

When Jesus spoke of strength and power, people thought primarily of armed forces and weapons and physical strength. But he was thinking of the strength which comes from within. When Jesus spoke of treasures, people thought of material possessions.

Yet Jesus accepted the devotion and enthusiasm of that crowd. In the same way God accepts our love and praise and worship even though these are sometimes mistakenly given. God knows that our motives are never completely pure. Jesus knew that! He also knew that we have to start somewhere, and we oftentimes begin with a very immature faith. God accepts us no matter how stumbling our faith may be.

The love of God accepts the Martha's of the world as well as the Mary's.

Jesus also knew that Palm Sunday that much of the love and devotion he was receiving would not last very long. A few days later some or many of the same people would be in that crowd that shouted — "Give us Barabbas! Crucify Christ!" But he accepted the enthusiasm and acclaim anyway. It was valid for the moment.

So too we are to beware of quenching someone's enthusiasm too quickly. Even though we might be certain that it will not last very long, let it be. Too often we are tempted to tell people to be quiet, to stop being so happy and joyful by telling them it can't last. We try to spoil the beautiful moment.

I've heard people say to children who are naturally happy and extraordinarily open, "Just wait, someday you'll find that life is full of sadness and tragedy." And so, they will. But why let that thought spoil the moment of our happiness and beauty right now. Such comments serve no purpose.

So, there we have it — Martha and Palm Sunday. They go together in a curious way. They tell us first of all to learn to relax, to celebrate. I believe Martha changed, and we too can change.

Like Martha, we are often very busy. Our lives are filled and yet unfilled. There are things to do each day, people to meet, letters to write, calls to make, appointments to keep, meetings to attend. Most of us feel like Martha, that we are always behind schedule.

And it's difficult not to be busy. In our society, being busy is a symbol of importance. We don't like to admit that we are not busy. But JESUS knew that Martha's life was also unfilled. Underneath her busyness was an emptiness which she was trying to fill in the wrong way.

Thus, she had to hear the words — "Do not worry! Do not be anxious. Make room in the center of your life for God's Spirit. Recognize once again your connection to the Divine that pervades the universe. Then all of life is different because it begins from a different point.

When God is at the center of our living, then we no longer think of ourselves as nobodies who need to acquire worth through busyness or by our own efforts. We don't have to earn self-worth. There is a worth to each of us the moment we are created, a worth that nothing can ultimately change or destroy because it has been given to us by God.

2. And do not be afraid of being enthusiastic and celebrating. Do not be so busy that you have no time for the Palm Sundays of life — those times of unreserved joy and happiness. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you consider yourself to be a Type A or Type B person? What evidence do you have?

2. What are some of your major worries in life? What are you most anxious about?

3. What do you enjoy most in life? If someone gave you a free day to do anything you wanted, what would you do?

4. Have you doubted God's love for you or for others? How have you in your life experienced the love of God? Have you ever felt that you had to earn God's love or love from other people?