

Bar Harbor Congregational Church Sermon  
By Rev. Rob Benson  
July 17, 2016  
***A Balm in Gilead***

As of Friday morning I was convinced that Psalms 63 would be our only scripture reading. But by Saturday morning I decided to add back in one of our lectionary readings. So I share with you Luke, chapter 10 beginning with the 38<sup>th</sup> verse which is on page 68 in your pew Bibles.

*“Now as they went on their way, He entered into a village and a woman named Martha received Jesus into her house. And she had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving and she went to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” The Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha. You are anxious and troubled about many things. One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her.”* The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts bear your words of grace into each of our lives. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Imagine you’re visiting someone in the hospital. You know that they need medical attention. Let’s say they need their wrist set. Something actually has to be done. And they also need patience and the healing of time. Or maybe something a little less dire. Let’s say you’ve got the famous sniffing, sneezing, aching, coughing, stuffy head, fever syndrome. And you need both NyQuil and rest. For both of our individual and collective lives, marked by the various ailments of modern living. Anxiety, alienation, hostility and brokenness. There’s what we can do to make it better: acts of mercy and compassion, acts of justice and peace. And then there are times when what we really need to do is to say two prayers and call on God in the morning.

Our spiritual life is neither 100% action nor 100% contemplation but a dynamic. A rhythm known today as, on the one hand the inward journey of deepening our connection with God and listening for God’s purposes in our lives, and on the other hand, the outward journey of engagement in healing tasks in the world as we are led by God. Our job is to sense the ebb and flow of this rhythm along our spiritual pathways. It’s not something that’s necessarily in sync. We might all be in different places in that rhythm but the important thing is to remember is to tend each aspect collectively and individually, both the inward and the outward. If you will, to run along with the kids flowing with the tide (referring to today’s children’s time).

Those who follow the lectionary closely know that today’s reading, Psalm 63 is not in the cards for today. After this awful week I was initially drawn away from the challenging prophecies of Amos and also the puzzling story of Mary and Martha for the reassurances of Psalm 63. As I absorbed the consolation and hope of the Psalm, both God’s comfort of the afflicted and in the affliction of the evildoers I realized that the

posture of receptivity in the Psalm, the yearning for God and trust in God, sounds an awful lot like what Mary was doing at the feet of Jesus, sitting at his feet, pouring out her soul, receiving the fullness of His grace. Just as Psalm 63 spoke to our thirst for the reassurance of God's presence so the passage from Luke echoes shows the importance of, what someone in our Tuesday Bible study said, cultivating a Mary heart in the Martha world. I love that! It's just . . . you get it! *Cultivating a Mary heart in a Martha world.*

She promised she'd read the book and get back to us but I think we get it. So, how do we do that? We're professional Marthas and amateur Marys. I mention this dynamic of an inward and outward journey. You'll hear me say that a lot over the years. It's a rhythm like the tides. Last week I felt so strongly, that reconnecting with our woundedness and our need for God and being open to receiving healing grace both from God and from neighbors that we might only reluctantly acknowledge—doing that can strengthen the ties that bind us, the bridges that unite us beyond all of the faultlines in our world today. In short by our behavior, our mindset and of course by the grace of prayer, we can practice the shalom of God's coming kingdom.

Last week I focused on the outward journey in response to the scourge of violent mistrust, by encouraging us to love our neighbors through confronting racism, in building bridges of respect and trust, through humbling ourselves to receive the kindness of someone we hadn't met before or might not like. All of this is practicing our faith in the goodness of God who desires the best not just for me but for all us. That's Martha stuff. That's *doing* stuff.

How many of you are list makers? Be proud. It's O.K. Some people are reluctant to acknowledge it. I'm a list maker. The upside is that it's doing what needs to be done and doing what God wants, the outward journey. The downside is, as Jesus says to Martha we can get worried and distracted by a lot of things. We can get busy. We can get too busy. Sometimes we're simply busy for busy's sake. So there's another pull in this rhythm, the inward journey. So imagine this. You've set aside a couple hours for a Saturday morning project. It'll only take a couple of hours, you say. And it ends up taking the better part of a week. Just like that, when you got your eyes on the prize, and you're working on loving your neighbor and receiving your neighbor's love too, when things still come unhinged. When doing small good things in one's own neighborhood seem so totally inadequate to the enormity of the brokenness and suffering in the world.

Well, if you didn't already have an inclination to pray, surely at that point, prayer happens. This week when the waves of terror and instability loom large; when our tasks mount up; when we ponder our insignificance and perceive a huge gap between the way the world is and the way we know God wants it to be; when we lose our way, our priorities, our perspective; when someone tosses yet another ball into our midst and we run out of eyes and hands. Well, then we're at a crossroads. Either we double down, spin faster, plan harder, work later, unleash our inner Marthas, or we remember that it's a great time to stop and listen, reach into our pockets for that touchstone of grace (pulling a stone out of his pocket). I just found this again up here in the pulpit; it's a little

rock that says **peace** and I've had it off and on in my pocket for a year and a half. And it lives here (setting it on the pulpit) and I found it again this morning. Maybe you have a little touchstone like this. Physical. Metaphorical. That's the time. Find it again. Because we remember that, just like it's not all about us, neither is it all **up** to us. Juggling balls, spinning plates, rubbing our heads, and patting our bellies all at the same time, all by ourselves, won't bring near the kingdom of God. That ultimately it's the work of the Holy Spirit to melt hearts of stone and kindle and rekindle the love of God alive in each one of us and at work in every one of us. The inexorable flood of bad news, of violence and grief week after week after week. As so many have said time and again *is this simply the new normal?* To which I ask *how can we possibly live like this?* I don't know I don't know the middle ground if there is one between shutting my ears and retching with grief and despair. Is it, *don't just stand there, do something* or is it *don't just do something, stand there?*

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. I guess when I was praying my way through this this week, I heard that old song again. There is a balm in Gilead. I wanted to find out a little bit more about it so –maybe you all know this already— that phrase *balm in Gilead* comes from the eighth chapter of Jeremiah. Here's what it sounds like. My joy is gone. Grief is upon me. My heart is sick. For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt. I mourn and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? That seemed to sum it up for me this week. My heart is sick. Is there no balm? And then there's the song; it's why they wrote it. There **is** a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. We need it today. Come, O Lord. There **is** a balm in Gilead to heal the sinsick soul. Are you sick of all this violence and sin? I sure am. Come, O Lord. So hear again these words from the Psalmist, words of God's promise for us all. *My soul will be satisfied with rich food. My mouth will praise you God with joyful lips when I remember you on my bed and my meditate on you in the watches of the night. For you have been my help and in the shadow of your wings, I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you, your right hand upholds me.*

There **is** a balm in Gilead; come here, O Healer.