

SUNDAY, JULY 18, 2010
THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Luke 10:38-42 (Attitude Adjustment 101)

TODAY'S SERMON THEME:

You know it's time for an attitude adjustment: (1) When all you can think about is yourself; (2) When thoughts about other people's actions or inactions are driving you crazy; and (3) When you find yourself frustrated and angry most of the time. If any of these sound familiar, you most likely need to spend more time with the Lord. He is, after all, the only One who can "make all things new." Including our attitudes.

1. About ten years ago, some close friends of ours wound up losing nearly everything in their lives: Their business, their farm, their jobs, their savings accounts. Bill collectors were showing up at their house. Creditors were calling at all hours. And tax officials were sending notice-after-notice to them. For the first time in their lives, our friends were forced to rely on family and friends for food, clothing, college tuition for their oldest child, payment of utility bills and insurance policies, and all of the other necessities of life. After a catastrophic business failure, with no income from their business or farm, they were forced to take all sorts of odd jobs to help pay off their every-increasing debts. TO ALL OUTWARD appearances, this might look like rock bottom. TO ALL OUTWARD appearances, this might look like the end of the road. TO ALL OUTWARD appearances, this might look like the lowest possible point. But it wasn't. Not for this family. The only thing they did NOT lose was their faith in God. This family -- four people in all -- continued to be joyful, prayerful, hopeful, and respectful. And if you ran in to them around town, you would never know what was going on. They continued to smile. They continued to reach out to others. They continued to serve in our parish soup kitchen. As they reached out to others, they saw the stresses and strains that others faced. And they realized that NO AMOUNT OF MONEY, FAME, OR FORTUNE can buy happiness. They had indeed lost almost everything. Everything except the HOPE and the FAITH that God had placed in their hearts.
2. Two years into their financial setback, I asked the husband to speak at a meeting of our men's group. Only a few people knew the full extent of their financial disaster. But as this man spoke, I could see several men nodding in understanding and agreement. One man asked him what his SECRET was. My friend said there was NO SECRET. He said he really believed

that God is sovereign over all things -- just like the Bible says -- and that the Lord would never leave them or forsake them. Despite the pain of financial catastrophe, they knew that God still loved them and cared for them . . . and that "all things work together for good for those who love the Lord" (Romans 8:28). They knew that the Lord had not turned against them, and that they could still TRUST in Him. And the most important thing, he said, was that he and his family made a DAILY ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT every morning. Each and every day, each and every morning, they made a conscious decision to be GRATEFUL and not HATEFUL. In his words, he said: "You just can't be hateful and grateful at the same time. And it's YOUR choice which one you choose."

3. I have never forgotten these words. Mainly because they are fundamentally and existentially true. There ARE truly only TWO ways to look at life: Life is either totally random and chaotic, or it is being lived out according to some divine purpose. My friend and his family believed that life is controlled by a loving and all-powerful God, who has revealed Himself to us in Holy Scripture. And their faith in God gave them HOPE. And their hope gave them PEACE. Those who believe in the "chaos theory" of life -- the luck of the draw, the arbitrary powers of nature, the survival of the fittest -- these folks are forced to rely completely on themselves. On their own internal or external resources. And when they fail, as we all do, hope disappears, faith crumbles, and despair sets in.

4. This brings me to the main point I want to make this morning, before we look at the wonderful Gospel story of the sisters Mary and Martha. My point has to do with ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENTS . . . how we recognize the warning signs, and what we can do about them:

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5. In our Gospel for today, from Luke Chapter 10, Jesus introduces us to two of His closest friends -- the sisters Mary and Martha of Bethany (the sisters of the man named Lazarus). Let us look at their story, and let us decide for ourselves which sister is in desperate need of an attitude adjustment.

(1) The setting. Jesus arrives at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, in the little village of Bethany, just a couple of miles around the Mount of Olives to the East of Jerusalem. Jesus was on His way to

Jerusalem, and stopped off to see His friends. A couple of years later, He would return to Bethany four days after Lazarus died -- and would summon the dead man back to life one day before entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. (The raising of Lazarus, on the eve of the Passover Festival, became the pivotal event before the first Holy Week. But THAT event came two years later.)

(2) The scene. As Jesus arrives in the village of Bethany, Martha is hard at work in the kitchen, and Mary is out talking to Jesus and the other guests. Jesus is teaching the small group outside, and Martha is going about her chores. Martha suddenly notices that she is the ONLY one who is working, so she summons Jesus to the kitchen to ask Him to do something about her lazy sister Mary. "Lord, don't you CARE that my sister has bailed out on me and left me to do all the cooking, cleaning, and setting up? DO SOMETHING about it for me!"

(3) The response. Jesus does not respond to Martha in the way she expected, in the way she hoped he would respond. Instead of sharing in her wonderful pity-party . . . instead of joining in her moment of self-absorption, He says to her: "Martha, Martha. You are troubled and bothered by many things, but only one thing is needed now. And Mary has chosen it."

(4) Martha's mental state. What EXACTLY was going on in Martha's mind at that moment? What EXACTLY was she thinking. In Luke's use of the Greek language, we get a close glimpse into Martha's mental condition . . . a glimpse that probably sounds VERY familiar to most of us. Luke 10:40: 'Ho de Martha perisiepato peri polloun diakonian.

"Martha was driven to mental distraction by her many tasks."

In other words, Jesus noticed that Martha was focused primarily on her OWN feelings, and about the actions or inactions of others. Martha was spending too much time looking INWARD, at her own feelings and emotions. And she was getting angrier and angrier with what her sister was NOT doing. Mary's INACTION -- Mary's choice to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to His teaching -- was DRIVING Martha crazy. She was totally and completely frustrated. And she wanted JESUS TO DO SOMETHING about it. To put it another way: Martha needed a major spiritual attitude adjustment. She, too, needed to spend more time with Jesus. Now, it is extremely important to point out that there was nothing WRONG in what Martha was doing in the kitchen. She was, in fact, serving the Lord right there IN the kitchen. She was performing a necessary and VITAL task for the Lord. Her ACTIONS were not wrong. WHAT WAS WRONG WAS HER ATTITUDE. She was hateful instead of grateful. She

was going through the motions of service, but with a heart filled with hatefulness, instead of gratitude. She had, as Jesus told her, chosen the wrong thing to focus on. Martha chose to focus on herself. Mary chose to focus on the words of Jesus. Martha was hateful; Mary was grateful. And both attitudes resulted from a CHOICE.

6. A great homework assignment for this week would be to ask ourselves: What things DISTRACT us from choosing gratefulness over hatefulness? What tasks drive us to mental distraction? What things keep us from focusing on the Lord? Do WE need an attitude adjustment? Maybe so: IF we find OURSELVES angry at OTHER PEOPLE all the time. IF we find ourselves FRUSTRATED about other people's words or actions. IF we spend LONG periods of time thinking only about ourselves? Life is filled with strange twists and turns, and some of them can leave us in dire circumstances. Life can beat us to the lowest possible point, to a place that seems hopeless and desolate. Our own tasks -- just like Martha's -- can drive us to mental and spiritual distraction. Even the work we do for the Lord can seem like menial drudgery and pointlessness. But remember -- the main problem is our ATTITUDE. When we are hateful and bitter, perturbed and distracted, that is a classic sign that we need to focus more on JESUS and less on ourselves. Jesus is, after all, the ONLY ONE who can "make all things new." ALL things. Including our attitudes.