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## The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 17, 2022

Believers love to do things for Jesus; they desire to serve him in ways they can. Our Christian service pleases God. In the Gospel for this coming Sunday the attitudes and actions of several of Jesus' followers remind us that being served by Jesus is always more important than serving Jesus. The service we offer God is good; the service Jesus offers us is essential.

### Sermon

#### Genesis 18:1-14

(The story of Mary and Martha is recorded in Luke 10:38-42)

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

"Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

Introduction – When we think about the story of Mary and Martha, Martha tends to catch the criticism. You remember them, right? Mary and Martha were two sisters who lived in the village of Bethany near Jerusalem. They had a brother named Lazarus and all three were faithful followers of Jesus. Most of you remember that Lazarus died suddenly and that Jesus went to Bethany to comfort the sisters. The Bible tells us that Jesus wept, the only time we know that Jesus shed tears at a funeral. So Jesus was really close to this family. The Bible specifically says that Jesus loved them.

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but that episode comes later. It seems that Jesus often stayed at their home when he visited Jerusalem. That's what was happening in today's Gospel. When Jesus arrived—apparently unannounced—Martha went into action: cooking, cleaning, making the bed—whatever it took to make Jesus comfortable. All the while, Mary just sat with Jesus and listened to him talk. After a while Martha got a little cranky and complained to Jesus. Most of you remember what Jesus said: **Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. But only one thing is needed and Mary has chosen what is better.** So Mary comes off as the hero and Martha comes off as the culprit.

It's not exactly like that when you stop and think about it. What Martha was doing was absolutely the natural thing for her to do. She was doing what a lot of Christian women would do, even today. She had a guest in the house—and maybe the disciples were at the supper table, too. So it made perfect sense that Martha would get moving. Her exasperation with Mary? I get that. She's thinking Mary should share the load. We all feel like that sometimes. Martha was acting simply on the basis of practical common sense.

Common sense is a quality we all value. We pray for common sense. We don't want to count our chickens before they're hatched. We want to look before we leap; we want to stay calm and carry on. All good. But sometimes common sense, even when it is really common, can confuse us. That's what happened with Martha. And what's what happened with Sarah in the First Reading for today. We heard Sarah react with absolute common sense: old ladies don't have babies. So the Lord had to speak to Sarah just like he had to speak to Martha and just like he needs to speak with us. There's something more reliable and more necessary than common sense. Here's the idea:

### **The Lord's Promises Deal with Common Sense**

So let me tell you about Sarah. But first I have to tell you about Abraham because Sarah was Abraham's wife. Abraham was the man God chose to be the father and founder of the nation of Israel. God planned to send the Savior to the nation of Israel, so Abraham was also to be the ancestor of Jesus. God called Abraham to move to a new country and Sarah went along. God told Abraham: **I will make you a great nation.** Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65. They had no children.

Abraham sensed the problem. How was he going to be the father of a great nation when he wasn't the father of even one son? Common sense told him: This is not going to happen. He came up with another plan. He would make one of his servants his heir. God didn't go for that idea and repeated the promise. Sarah came up with a different plan: Abraham could father a son with one of Sarah's servant girls. A boy was actually born—Ishmael—but God didn't go for that plan either. When Abraham was 99, God came to him again and repeated the promise with specific details. **Within a year, the Lord said, your wife Sarah will give birth to your son whose name will be Isaac.** Abraham struggled with that, but he believed what the Lord told him.

But Abraham wasn't the only one involved in this. Sarah was involved, too, and so the Lord needed to bring her on board. And that's where the First Reading starts. **The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.** At first Abraham had no clue that one of these men was the Lord, but visitors didn't come by all that often so he was going to be cordial. He gave them water to wash off the sand on their feet, he instructed Sarah to make bread cakes, he picked out a good animal to roast and added a few more delicacies. Very nice. But the three men really weren't there to eat. **Where is your wife Sarah? they asked. There, in the tent, he said. Then one of them said**—and this was the Lord talking--**I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.** By now Abraham knew who was talking. This was the Lord.

So what about Sarah? **Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"**

Laughing at the Lord is pretty serious, but this wasn't a laugh of disrespect or unbelief. It was a common sense laugh. Like a "you just won the lottery" laugh or an "inflation will end tomorrow" laugh. Right. Common sense told Sarah it doesn't happen that way and everybody knew it didn't happen that way. Sarah was no obstetrician, but she knew enough about human anatomy and the birds and the bees to know that 89-year-old women do not have babies. It was just common sense.

Common sense is hardly ever a bad thing. Common sense keeps us from being gullible and being taken advantage of. It stops us from being fools who rush in where angels fear to tread. We rely on common sense. It helps us know when to plant and when to harvest, when to save and when to spend, when to travel and when to stay home, when to speak up and when to stay quiet. But common sense can fool us. Common sense says you never discuss religion with friends or relatives. Common sense says that time is money and that Bible classes and devotions take up valuable time. Common sense says it makes no sense to throw money at ministries and missions. Common sense can be perfectly reasonable and everyone knows it, but it can lead us to faulty assumptions and upside-down priorities. Common sense is what led Sarah to faulty assumptions—she couldn't have a child--and common sense is what led Martha to upside down priorities—preparing for Jesus was more important than listening to Jesus. So sometimes the Lord has to get involved with our common sense. That's exactly what he did with Sarah and Martha and it's exactly what he does with us.

**Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."** The Lord knew that Sarah was listening. He wanted her to know that he saw her face and heard her laugh and knew her thoughts even though she was inside the tent. And he took her straight to his promises: Nothing is too hard for the Lord! Nothing gets in the way of God's promises. If God promises that an old woman will have a baby, she'll have a baby, even though it makes no sense that she should. If God promises that the one thing needful will never be taken away, then it will never be taken away even though common sense tells us that nothing lasts. If God promises that he forgives our sins, then he forgives our sins, even though it makes no sense to forgive people like us. If God promises to be with us wherever we go, then he will be with us wherever we go, even though we can't even see him. If God promises that sickness or poverty or tragedy can bring blessings in our lives, then they will bring blessings even though everyone knows—I mean it's common sense--that sickness and poverty and tragedy are always bad. The Lord dealt with Sarah's common sense by pointing her to his promises. The Lord dealt with Martha's common sense by leading her to his promises. And the Lord who blesses us with common sense deals with our common sense by making us certain of his blessings and content with his blessings even when his blessings make no sense at all!

We can almost see the smile on Jesus' face: **Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.** Jesus wasn't scolding Martha. He knew that her concern for him was a fruit of her faith and her love. But he pointed Martha to the place all of us must go. **One thing is needed and Mary has chosen what is better.** What is needed and what is better are the promises of God. The promises of God are found in the works and the words of Jesus. The works and words of Jesus are found in the Scriptures. And the promises in the Scriptures will never be taken away. Amen.