

**Kailua Christian Church (UCC)**  
**Sunday Worship, November 12, 2023**  
**Message: The Homeless Church Council**  
**Rev. Irene Willis Hassan**

Scriptures

**Exodus 3:1-12**

1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb,<sup>[a]</sup> the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 He said, "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

**Luke 10:38-42**

**38** As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. **39** She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. **40** But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

**41** "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, **42** but few things are needed—or indeed only one.<sup>[a]</sup> Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

## **Sermon: The Homeless Church Council**

Some of you may be prayerfully considering taking leadership roles in the church as we move into a time of considering leadership transfer for 2024. Or, maybe more accurately, some of you may be praying that God calls somebody else to take over this time.

The fact is that it's unlikely that the church leadership will be much different next year than it was in the last several years. We're currently a small community, and even new people coming to our church won't necessarily have the experience and insight needed like those of you who have faithfully been here for years. So, if you're feeling like Martha in the kitchen saying "this is too much I don't want to make the preparations anymore," maybe it's time to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to what he is telling you.

Yes, church leadership involves meetings, reports, maintenance, and all the upkeep that anything in daily life requires. There's a lot of Martha's distracted preparation and maintenance in church leadership.

But we see here in scripture that Jesus doesn't want us to focus on the preparation and the frustrating cycle of maintenance and reporting. He wants us to focus on Him, to be in awe of God's transformative presence and absorb every moment and word that He blesses us with.

Easier said than done, though, right? It's easy to say just let God guide your decisions and your work in Leadership, but at the end of the day, the trash still needs to be taken out and the financial reports still sent to accounting. No amount of fancy spiritual words will change the mechanics of what a leadership role in the church looks like.

I started thinking about the churches and organizations I've served and where I saw leadership thrive. When I was in seminary, I interned at a homeless church in downtown Boston. There were two pastors that directed the organization, but the board and leadership roles were otherwise all homeless people. And I don't mean people that just really cared about homelessness – I truly mean the people who were the deacons and the council and the trustees and the hospitality crew and the tech crew were all grungy, smelly folks who hadn't showered in weeks and were sleeping in the doorways and under bridges in downtown Boston. Some of them were fighting active addictions; others would sit through council meetings talking to a person next to them who wasn't actually there; others would be late to meetings because they had just gotten out of jail or a parole meeting. The people who ran the church are the same people you see in tents under Nimitz highway or along the Kawaiui Marsh. Hard to imagine, right? Harder even still to imagine that it was one of the best functioning church councils I've ever pastored.

Despite interruptions from police drama or imaginary people in the room, council meetings still accomplished the goals of worship and mission for the organization. The trustees board still collected donations and organized campaigns – and the entire time I was there, the only person to ever commit financial abuse through the church was actually one of the pastors, not any of the homeless trustees. The worship team worked together fluidly to set up and administer worship and communion and then pack it all away when the service was over. The volunteer engagement team welcomed the guest churches that came to provide lunch and blessed them with articulate and moving speeches about homelessness in greater Boston that

included personal testimonies. We had functional leadership in that church that looked like any other church leadership, even if none of those people in leadership had houses.

The reason that the homeless church in Boston was so functional despite the leadership being almost entirely homeless is because the people that served cared about the mission. All the places of their lives were filled with cold bureaucracy: fill out this paperwork to get food stamps, no you did it wrong, do it again; you can't sleep here we're sweeping the area, you'll have to move; you have to keep getting these anti-psychosis shots to qualify for this program, et cetera, et cetera. The church was the only place of community and purpose that many of them had in their lives and it was a joy for them to serve. It was the only place in their lives that valued their voices in leadership. Despite not having any money, none of them thought about stealing from the church. Despite many of them not having normal mental faculty, all of them understood the goal of the church and knew how to run it. They groaned about things like grape juice and worship closet organization like the rest of us do, but I never heard one of them groan once about serving the church's leadership.

So why did that leadership team function so well, when you wouldn't imagine a council meeting that involves alien conspiracy theories and rubbish bags full of old cans being that effective? First of all, look who God calls to do His work. Moses asked God, "Who am I, that I should lead?" Moses was a murderer – he murdered an Egyptian guard in Exodus 2. Jacob was a liar, Noah was a drunk; many of Jesus' disciples were disreputable people like tax collectors and prostitutes. If God chose people like that to serve Him in the Bible, why can't the homeless on the streets of Boston do it, too?

You may think that you aren't spiritual enough, you aren't smart enough, you aren't strong enough to serve the leadership of the church, but God will certainly tell you otherwise. If God calls you, like Moses, it's your duty to stand before him and say, "Here I am." He sees your gifts even if you don't.

But maybe the problem isn't that you don't think you're "good enough," but rather, you're just tired. Maybe babysitting the grandkids, or your high stress job, or some health concerns you're experiencing take up a lot of your brain space and time and you just can't dedicate to doing One More Thing with your week. For the homeless people in Boston, the church wasn't competing with their time spent on other things. The needs of the church didn't compete with the rest of their lives not because they didn't have full plates already; homeless people have a lot to think about throughout the week, such as "how am I going to eat?" and "will I get robbed today?" Being homeless isn't any less time consuming than being middle class, and yet they served the church with joy.

That doesn't mean that knowing where your next meal is coming from or babysitting your grandkids isn't important. Those things are very important. But for the leadership in Boston, they weren't in competition for time and energy with their commitment to the church, because the church brought them joy and purpose.

For that Homeless Church Council in Boston, the church was a sacred space in the center of lives filled with grief and frustration. While most of your lives outside the church may not be a constant barrage of suffering with the church as the one beacon among a sea of sadness, the church is no less sacred in your life than it is for them.

Even if you're not homeless, Jesus expects your service to Him to be filled with wonder, joy, and purpose. What Martha did to prepare hospitality for the visit of Jesus is important, but the problem is, she was doing it because it felt like It Just Had To Be Done rather than remembering *why* she was doing it. Jesus reminded Martha the one thing that was important – to be loved by Him. When we remember that the goal is to be transformed by His Love, the time and energy we put into His Service becomes less of a chore and more of a source of joy. Your commitment to the church should build you up, not break you down into smaller pieces than you already feel like you have for yourself.

If serving the church doesn't feel like it's going to bring you Joy, then don't do it. Be Mary, simply sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him. Be Moses, open to hearing God speak who He is to you. If serving the church doesn't bring joy, or purpose, or hope to your life that adds abundance rather than taking away, there's either something that you need to invite God to adjust in your heart or invite God to adjust in the church.

If the commitments to the church feel like you're Martha in the kitchen frustrated about the lack of help, you are invited by Jesus to sit at His feet and listen to what he is telling you. So as you consider your role here at the church in 2024, I ask you to put down the burdens of maintenance for a moment and sit at the feet of Jesus to listen to Him. How can this place where He comes to meet you become a source of joy and inspiration in your life? How does Kailua Christian Church enhance the Love from Him that transforms you, and how can you give back? And if the church *doesn't* enhance that transformational love in you that calls you to lead, what is Jesus telling you needs to be changed?

You are invited to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen. And through your listening, may you be inspired to hear how he's asking you to serve Him. Amen.