

# “The One Thing Needful”

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Luke 10:38-42 First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest July 17, 2022

How is it that members of the same family can wind up with dramatically-different personalities? My great-grandfather who was also a pastor, had four daughters. Back in the 1940s, three of them purchased lots at Green Lake, Wisconsin—each lot behind the other: Aunt Lillian’s, Aunt Gladys’ and my own grandmother’s on the Lake. We called it “the Ant-hill.” When Dad would take us there for summer vacation, I got to spend time with them all.

Each one of these sisters was different. Aunt Lillian, the eldest, was very quiet. She read a lot, and she wrote poetry. She listened more than she spoke, and she had a wide, gentle smile. Grannie, the middle sister, was industrious. She was always busy making pies, or sugar cookies, or getting things ready for supper. There were always many dishes on the long porch table we dined on, and she expected us to “*keep things moving.*” She put her cookies in a cookie-jar, and I had to ask permission before sticking in my hand. Permission was granted based upon Grannie’s assessment of my moral standing at that particular point in the day—which could vary greatly!

Aunt Gladys, on the other hand, lived with Uncle Welker in their large Airstream trailer. She would welcome me at its aluminum door with a huge grin, a loud laugh, and a hug. Dragging me inside, she would give me a Tootsie-Roll before I even asked for it, and then pull out her cards for a game of Old Maid. Once a week, I had to play obligatory Scrabble with all three sisters at the same time. During the game, Aunt Gladys would talk incessantly, Grannie’s eyes were narrowed with determination and Aunt Lillian quietly won most every time. Each one was very much her own person, and as for me? Well, I ate a lot of Tootsie-Rolls, and I hate losing at Scrabble to this day.

I

In our text for this morning from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus and his disciples have come to a village, which in John’s Gospel is called Bethany, “the village of Mary and Martha,” located atop the Mt. of Olives about 2 miles east of Jerusalem. According to Luke, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home, where Mary her sister is living with her, and according to John, their brother Lazarus as well, whom Jesus raised from the dead. We don’t know whether Martha welcomed Jesus alone, or Jesus along with the company who was travelling with him. But if she had welcomed the latter, her modest home would have been packed with close to twenty people.

What would you do if twenty people showed up at your door? If it was at the Manse, Deb would leap into action, Remy would be banished to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, and I would be sent out to Sunset Foods. My wife is a very thoughtful and attentive host, but if she saw me lolligagging around with the guests, I would hear about it, and there'd be no cookies for me.

So let's assume the whole company is in Martha's home. There is a need for water, basins and linens—for washing and refreshment. Her guests would be hungry as well: perhaps for olives and flatbread and figs—maybe even a skin of wine. According to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish traditions of hospitality, the women would be expected to serve.

But now we encounter Martha's sister Mary. As Jesus reclines with his disciples, conversing with them, Luke tells us that Mary "sat at his feet and listened to what he was saying." To "sit at one's feet" is the position of a disciple, yet here we find Mary, a woman, adopting the same place as the men. How many of the Twelve were women? The answer is: none. Yet Mary sits at Jesus' feet to listen and learn also, which is extraordinary by 1<sup>st</sup> Century standards. This is another example of Jesus' treatment of women in a world dominated by men. Mary is honoring Jesus as her Teacher and Lord, and Jesus welcomes her discipleship.

Meanwhile, Martha is running around with "many tasks." The word in Greek is "*periespato*," which means being "encumbered," like trying to carry too many plates to the table at the same time. During school, I worked in restaurants, and I never could manage to carry more than 3 plates at a time. I knew women who could carry 5. Down in New Orleans at Commander's Palace, the Management expected me to commit food and drink orders to memory, without ever putting pen to paper in front of the guests. After doing this for 3-4 tables, I would feel very "encumbered." I wanted to say to the lady at the six-top, "*You're the smoked fish, right?—or are you the fried eggplant?*" But that would have been disastrous.

Yes—Martha, we are told, was "distracted:" distracted by "many things." This word has changed in meaning recently, with the proliferation of smartphones throughout society. Nowadays, if you are involved in a car-accident, the police officer may ask you, "Sir, were you distracted?" Be careful how you answer! I want to say, "Officer, my whole life consists of one distraction after another, and right now, you're the biggest distraction of all!" But that also would be disastrous...

## II

So here in our story, we find Martha running around playing the host and serving her guests, "distracted by her many tasks." This leads to stress, which in turn leads to resentment. Martha is becoming resentful toward her sister Mary, who is sitting at Jesus' feet. So she comes to him and says, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" Wow—there's a lot packed into that question, isn't there? There's self-righteousness and self-pity,

also. There is pride and resentment. And there is accusation and demand. “Tell her to help me,” she says to Jesus. Why doesn’t she tell Mary herself?

The truth of the matter is—this could happen in any family at one time or another. It’s probably happened in your family as well. All families have their “Mary and Martha moments,” and we must learn how to live together with fairness and mutual toleration. But this story isn’t a lesson about who is the better person. Both Mary and Martha are strong, honorable women. And both are the friends of Jesus. When, in John’s Gospel, their brother Lazarus dies, it is Martha who ventures out to meet Jesus on the open road saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him” (Jn. 11:22). On another occasion, six days before his death, Jesus and the Twelve return to Bethany, to the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Martha again serves, but Mary took a pound of nard—a pure and costly perfume—and anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them clean with her hair. Wow. What a devoted, selfless and beautiful thing to do for Jesus, on the eve of his death and burial. No—both of these women, while different in personality, are loved and accepted by Jesus. Along with their brother Lazarus, for whom Jesus wept, they are both his beloved friends. We need not judge between them. But we should listen to what Jesus says.

### III

Jesus now turns to Martha, saying with gentle remonstrance “Martha, Martha.” “Martha, Martha”—and his lovingkindness disarms her. “Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things.” Can you imagine our Lord saying those same words to you? Are you distracted? Juggling too many plates? How many things are using up your time? Ever since the pandemic, people don’t seem to be working any less. They may not be “going” to work, but I’m noticing they’re working one way or another nearly seven days a week. This is leading to stress and resentment, even “the Great Resignation” we’re hearing about that’s taking place across many walks of life right now—including the ministry. Just yesterday a young friend of mine—a very capable pastor—informed me he was leaving the ministry to get a degree in IT, for which I wished him the best. How can we find our way back into balance? Is it time to re-think our priorities, and our strategies for achieving them? Will our smartphones and emails have the first and last word on any given day, or is there a better way of living?

Jesus answered Martha saying, “You are distracted (literally divided into pieces) by many things; there is only one thing needful.” What one thing is Jesus talking about? He says that Mary has chosen it: what exactly does he mean? Looking at the text, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Jesus is pointing to time spent with himself: time devoted not to doing, but to being...being with the Lord. Mary chooses to be in relationship to Jesus by sitting in his presence and listening to his words. And her choice brings her strength, comfort and wisdom.

So how might we profit from this little story from Luke? By filling our days with more and more activities, or by “choosing the better part” of living? Living before God through a relationship with Jesus Christ?

I think that there are a lot of ways of doing this. I know some people, mostly Catholics, who go to church every day. But we don’t need to be “in the building” to have a relationship with the Lord. I know people who begin—and end—each day with a few moments of prayer. I know others who practice meditation, using their minds and bodies to “*Be still and know that I am God,*” as the Psalmist says. For my part, I spend time with God on my morning walk or bike ride, reciting prayers and psalms that I’ve committed to memory, like John Chrysostom’s “*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love;*” or from Psalm 51, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*” Sometimes, when I am alone walking in the desert, miles away from anyone, I will sing aloud the Doxology at the top of my voice. What manner of “sitting at Jesus’ feet” works best for you? Maybe it’s listening to sacred music, or maybe it’s just silently watching for the morning light to fill up the world again. “*Grief may tarry for a night,*” says the Psalmist, “*but joy comes with the morning.*”

You can even employ your ultimate distraction: your smartphone—to strengthen your relationship with Christ. There are free apps like “Holy Bible” and “Bible Gateway” that will put all of Scripture at your fingertips in dozens of different translations. There are prayer-guides and study-guides which you can use alone or with others to talk about what you’ve learned. And if smartphones aren’t your thing, there are small groups in our church and community in which you can participate weekly, studying the Word and applying it to our lives.

### Conclusion

Finally in our text for this morning, Jesus tells Martha, “*Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.*” Most people I know devote the better part of their time and energy pursuing the American Dream, accumulating things and possessions which sooner or later will be taken away. We gain wealth, but then what? We can’t take it with us. We exercise our bodies, but then what? Our bodies age and change. We get sick or injured, we can’t drive anymore, our friends pass away, we may even be forced to move out of our homes. These losses are a real part of living—and they can be devastatingly painful.

But friends—our relationship with Jesus Christ is something that can never be taken away. He is the source of our peace in this present moment, our joy in living, our hope for tomorrow and our comfort in dying. Like Mary, we also can “*choose the better part*” because, knowing we are loved and accepted just as we are, we can choose who we are becoming. We can choose to devote the best part of each day not to the many things which need to be done, but to the one

thing we've already been granted: to be a child of God and a disciple of Christ, who in life or in death has promised never to forsake us.

Now that's something worth taking ahold of. *"What a Friend we have in Jesus:"* Someone who will never be taken away.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.