

11 June 2017

**One Thing Needful**  
Luke 10:38-42

Our Gospel reading today is the familiar story from Luke 10, verses 38-42.

*38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' 41 But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.'*

Martha said more than that. I get it that Luke is writing a summary and trying to stay on topic, but, seriously? How many women in here have older sisters? If your older sister thought that you were leaving her to do all the work, would she stop after two sentences? No, what she really said was more like this:

*"Jesus, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I can't let this just go on forever. Here I am, trying to put together a meal for you and all these freeloader – I mean your faithful disciples (By the way, I heard that there were only twelve of you. Where did the rest of these people come from, and can you drop a hint to them to stop trampling my flower beds outside?) – as I say, here I am running in circles trying to take care of you, and my sister is doing absolutely nothing. Have you ever tried to bake two dozen loaves of bread and keep the fire going and mash hummus and roast the chicken and fetch and carry for this many people at the same time? No, you haven't. You're a man. I could use a couple more hands in here. Actually, I could use a dozen more, but two is a start, and if there are two hands anywhere that ought to be helping me, they are my sister's hands. Could you tell Mary to come help now?"*

*"I know it's wonderful that she wants to hear your teaching, but you know what? I'd like to hear your teaching, too. But if I came and did that, where would we be? I'll tell you where we'd be. We'd be really really hungry tonight. That's where we'd be."*

Mary, though, said nothing. She sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his teaching. [Pause] Jesus was saying,

*"The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matt. 13:31-33, 44-46)*

And Martha said. *"Lord, it's all very well to talk about the Kingdom of Heaven like that, but we aren't there right now, and the Kingdom of Heaven doesn't chop the vegetables. I'd like to sell everything, and give it all up for that one priceless pearl, too, but there are people who depend*

*on me. I'd like to spend my day thinking spiritual thoughts, but somebody has to raise the children, pay the bills, sweep the floors, and bake the bread. The Bread! You there – yes, you, fishmonger, get in here and help me get the bread out of the oven! Use a hotpad, genius! Whew! Well, they aren't burned, but I'll tell you this, if they had been, it wouldn't have been my fault! It would have been all Mary's doing! But look at her! Does she care about our supper? No!"*

Mary, though, said nothing. She sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his teaching. [Pause] Jesus was saying,

*"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." (Matt. 6:25-34)*

And Martha said. *"Don't be anxious about tomorrow? Lord, you don't understand. Two weeks from tonight, we start Vacation Torah School at synagogue! I'm doing the crafts this year. I figure I've got about 40 hours ahead of me of counting beads, measuring thread, cutting out little shapes in fabric, and I haven't even looked at the material past Wednesday! And before we can have VTS we've got to get the trustees in to fix the roof over the nursery, which the rabbi said he was going to see to, but if you knew our rabbi . . . the man has two speeds, slow and dead, and if anyone's going talk to the trustees it's going to have to be me. And of course this would have to be the week that my United Jewish Women circle is meeting, and I can't just skip the meeting: it's the Martha Circle. Besides, I promised Rachel I'd take some food over to her mother's house on Friday, since she's been so sick, and I'll tell you this, if I don't make the plans and schedules and think all this through ahead of time, none of it will get done! What do you mean, 'Don't be anxious about tomorrow?'"*

Mary still said nothing, sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his teaching, but Jesus turned toward Martha and said, *"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."* (Luke 10:41-42)

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Normally when we preachers speak from this story, we remark that we identify with Martha and say something like this: "We need our Marthas, but Mary chose the better part." There's only

one problem with that: that's not what the text says. Jesus doesn't say that Mary chose the *better* portion; he says that she chose the *good* portion. He doesn't say, "We need our Marthas"; he says only *one* thing is needful, and it's not the stuff that Martha's doing. But we go on excusing and defending Martha, because, in fact, we are Martha, anxious and troubled about many things, looking for meaning in busy-ness.

It's how we live our lives – bustling lives of continuous partial attention, scheduling our existence in sixty minute blocks (or, if we're *very* important, thirty minute increments), measuring our worth in terms of visible results, trying to be everything to everybody all at once. And it's how we do church, too. We fill our spiritual lives with activities, plans, duties, meetings, and all manner of scurrying about, anxious and troubled by many things – trying to increase membership, increase giving, and stir up excitement. We wear ourselves out pursuing those goals – not one of which is ever mentioned by Christ – and leave ourselves spent and too worn out and distracted to do the one thing Jesus said was needful. To sit at his feet and listen to his teaching.

Yes, I know that those tasks have to be done. We do have to pay our bills, prepare lessons and worship, make coffee, have meetings to decide issues, and all those other things that we get busy with, and we as a church are very grateful to those of you who spend hours each week doing those tasks. I'm *not* saying to give up all you're doing, necessarily. But I am saying that we must consider those tasks rightly. Our busy-ness is not our service to Christ. Our service to Christ is to listen to what he says. Martha's problem was not that she was an active Christian, the sort of person who gets things done. Her problem was that she was so busy doing things that she forgot why. When we start by listening to Christ, we will eventually move on to action; but when we start with activity, that's all we get: activity. Being really, really busy in church does not lead to listening to Christ. It's more likely to get in the way.

First United Methodist Church is in a time of transition, and transition is stressful and disruptive. Always. But disrupting the comfortable status quo is also an opportunity. When things are already changing is a good time to ask, "What else should we change? What new thing might we begin?" This is good and right and proper. But my final exhortation to you as your pastor is this: do not fall into the trap that most churches and *all* denominations fall into, of behaving as if activity were the goal. It is not. You are here to listen to Christ. So take your time. Pray. Listen. Talk together. Worship. Let activity arise from listening. Because being busy is not needful. Really only one thing is needful.

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Anyone here remember hearing this sermon before? Yes, I preached a slightly different version here once before, on October 30, 2005. Twelve years ago. My first sermon to this church. Bookends to my time here In that twelve years I have frequently forgotten it and gotten wrapped up in ministry by To-Do List, but with the perspective that comes with transition, I have returned to it, and I will start with this sermon at Lake Street next month because it still matters. It's not about activity. God doesn't need us to get stuff done; God needs us to be quiet and listen. Once we learn to do that, God can do anything. Amen and amen.