

Sermon for Sunday, July 17, 2016

ONE THING

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” Now had this wonderful little episode in Jesus’ life ended right there, we could all sleep easy at night. We could live with a gentle and loving commentary on our tendency to get caught up in life’s minutia. Who among us is not worried and distracted by many things? Who among us has not allowed the mundane details of day to day life, and even of serving the Lord, to draw our attention away from our focus on God’s kingdom, on God’s Word, and on our devotion to Christ? “Yes Lord, yes Lord, I know; I need to pay more attention to you, to be more focused on the kingdom, to set my face toward the Promised Land even as you set your face so resolutely toward the Cross.” We are all Martha.

But the story doesn’t stop there, and that’s what makes it a challenging and difficult word from the Lord. Because right after we have all identified ourselves so effortlessly with Martha’s busyness and distractedness, and even with Martha’s complaint about the lack of assistance from her sister, Jesus says, “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” And that little comment hurts us, because it makes us look bad, and feel bad. Mary we aren’t. We don’t identify with her at all, and frankly don’t want to. She’s the younger sister, whom we suspect is spoiled and lazy, unappreciative of Martha’s hard labor from which she benefits, whiny when she has to lift a finger to help, head in the clouds, and out of touch with reality. So why in God’s name would Jesus lift her up as the one who has chosen the better part? “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But no, the Lord tells us to chill out. Mary is doing a good thing, the one thing that is important.

Now because we identify with Martha, and feel so personally wounded by the Lord’s criticism of her, we are always trying to redeem her, to make Martha look a little better. I mean, where would the world be without Martha and all of us who are like her? Where would our worship service be this morning without the greeters, the ushers, the acolytes, the musicians, all those wonderful saints who scurry around, completely distracted by their responsibilities so the rest of us can sit and listen? We’d be in real trouble. And just so, do all the commentaries on this particular passage, and most sermons, try to soften the Lord’s rebuke by acknowledging Martha’s worth and value. It’s a noble response, but a bit misdirected, because it puts far too much emphasis on the context in which we are listening, instead of paying attention to the context in which Jesus is speaking.

We know what Martha is doing. She is busy providing the kind of hospitality to Jesus and his disciples for which a Jewish household was famous, preparing a sumptuous feast, serving her guests, and clearing away the dishes. Martha is doing exactly what she is expected to do and supposed to do. But what is it that Mary is doing, and why does it receive the Lord’s blessing? She’s sitting at the Lord’s feet and listening to him. She’s learning what he has to say about scripture, she’s finding out what it means to be a disciple, she’s engaged in the study of God’s Word, right along side the men. Along side the men! Unheard of! Outlandish! Scandalous! A woman’s place is in the kitchen! Yes, where Martha is. And now you are beginning to hear this story in its original context.

Hebrew women were not permitted the luxury of studying God's Word. That privilege was for the men, until Jesus came along. Jesus invited women to be his disciples, to take part in the ministry of the gospel, and to study with him. He rewrote the social contract. It was absolutely revolutionary, and it caused a lot of ruckus, not only among men, but also among women. Just as in the nineteen seventies, when the women of our society were divided about the "Women's Liberation Movement" –some content and fulfilled in their roles and others chaffing at their limitations—there were women in the first century—the older sisters I expect—who felt the ministry of hospitality, so much a part of the Hebrew tradition, was still a noble and appropriate calling for them. But there were also younger sisters who were eager for the new way of Christian discipleship, who were glad to dispense with the dishes in order to sit and listen to Jesus. With Martha and Mary as the protagonists, and with the responsibilities of hospitality as the foil, Jesus defends Mary's choice, and in so doing, extends an open invitation to all women, of every culture and time, to be his disciples. He declares in effect, that for women to sit and listen to God's Word, even at the expense of fulfilling the sacred duties of hospitality, is not only an appropriate choice, but the better choice, and the freedom to make that choice should not be taken away from them, as some men in the early church no doubt wanted to do. This story about Martha and Mary was, for first-century Christian women, their *Declaration of Independence*.

Women today, and men, take this choice for granted. So we hear this scripture quite differently. Instead of hearing an invitation to freedom, we hear a critique of our distractedness. Instead of acknowledging a word of social liberation, we hear a word of chastisement for leading busy lives. But to read this scripture as recommending meditation on faith and study of God's Word over faithful activity on behalf of Christ and his church is to create a false dichotomy. There is a need for both and a time for both. We need to do mission, and we need to pray. We need to meet in committees, and we need to worship. We need Martha and we need Mary, and that is precisely the point. Both serve an invaluable purpose on the journey of faith, as long as faithfulness to Jesus remains the focus.

Martha lost her focus. When Jesus came to visit, she got distracted by her many duties. Instead of thinking about Jesus and the joy of his presence, she began to think about herself; about how she was suffering, about how her sister was neglecting to help her, about how much she wanted to just sit and listen, but couldn't. So she began to feel hurt and angry. The duties weren't the problem. They were important, necessary, and honorable. The problem was that she lost sight of their end, which was the joyful service of the Lord, her master.

It was, in a way, Israel's problem. Instead of rejoicing in it's special calling to serve God as the chosen people, Israel began to chaff under its yoke, to complain about the ne'er do well Gentiles who weren't pulling their weight, to judge others as unworthy of God's grace and favor. They even began to judge each other, members of the same family of God. The wealthy looked down upon the poor, and the poor despised the wealthy. The conservatives wagged their tongues at the liberals and the liberals shook their fingers at the conservatives. It was brother against brother and sister against sister, and it was tearing the family apart.

Is this beginning to sound familiar at all? Is it beginning to remind you of our national politics? Is it beginning to remind you of our current social unrest? Is it beginning to remind you of life in the church, and even in our own denomination? When we get distracted from following Jesus, from loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we also stop loving our neighbor as ourselves, even our brothers and sisters in faith and across the political aisle. And that's when the criticism starts, and the harsh judgments, and the whining and complaining, and eventually the violence.

Back in the mid 1980's, when I and a group of church folk went down to Americus, Georgia to spend a week working for Habitat for Humanity International, I was handed a shovel and assigned the task, all by my lonesome, of moving red Georgia clay from the outside of a

foundation, to the inside, in preparation for pouring the concrete floor. It was very hard labor, and boring, and menial. I asked the foreman why they didn't get a backhoe, which could do in fifteen minutes what was going to take me several days. The foreman replied unsympathetically, "A backhoe is expensive. You are free." But as he and the others walked away, abandoning me to my laborious and lonesome fate, he suddenly turned to offer me a word of encouragement, and said, "Just keep reminding yourself that you are doing this for Jesus." I did, with each shovel full, and it made all the difference. Remembering why I was there, and whom I was serving, turned a menial and lonesome task into a spiritually enriching experience, and transformed hard labor into a labor of love.

Jesus invites us to stay on course, to remember whom we are serving and why, and to follow him on the road to the Promised Land. When we stay focused on following Jesus, on serving him and listening to him, our joy is complete, and there is no need or desire for sister to turn against sister, or brother against brother. There is only one thing, the love of the Lord our God. Would that we could all, every day, stay focused on that one thing. It is the better choice.

PRAYER: Almighty God, help us to stay focused on your kingdom by choosing to do the one thing that is really important, loving you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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