

## "The One Thing Needful"

Lk. 10:38-42

August 20, 2017

Pastor Larry Lineberger

Here is something to remember. As you look at church history you discover that departure from orthodoxy, the teaching of heresy or theological error, is seldom the outright teaching of falsehood. Usually **heresy is giving all of your attention to half of the truth**. In Christian theology the challenge is often keeping the appropriate tension between two seemingly contradictory or paradoxical truths. For example, Law & Gospel. Is our faith about obeying God's commands? Or receiving the undeserved gift of God's love and forgiveness? Is it about faith or works? The answer? YES! Is Jesus true God or true man? Yes! Is the Holy Communion bread and wine? Or body and blood? Yes! Give all your focus to half of the truth and you depart from Biblical orthodoxy.

Today we launch a sermon series on women of the Bible and the **focus is on Mary and Martha**. But before we even go there, I find it fascinating to note that the story immediately preceding the Mary-Martha account is the **parable of the Good Samaritan**. There, you recall, Jesus shamed a Jewish theological expert who came inquiring about the way to eternal life by telling him about a despised Samaritan who stopped to help a hurting stranger while the distinguished religious authorities walked by on the other side. The parable teaches the **importance of social concern**. No one who ignores the needs of his brother is worthy of the Kingdom of God!

Now Luke, who is really good theologian, follows that story immediately with the account of **Jesus at the home of Mary and Martha**. Martha, you recall, was doing exactly what Jesus was encouraging in the parable of the Good Samaritan. She was busy preparing a meal for a neighbor in need. She is working her fingers to the bone to provide for the physical needs of Jesus himself! And she is peeved, ticked, that her sister Mary is, from her perspective, shirking her duty. *"It must be nice, Mary, just sitting there with Jesus waiting for dinner to be served!"* And I'm sure she was surprised when Jesus didn't agree. No, he says, Mary has chosen the better part. *Take off your apron, Martha, sit down here with your sister listen to the Word of God.*

So, are we now thoroughly confused? Or do we understand that the full Christian life is a rhythm of action and disengagement, involvement in human needs and spiritual worship and reflection, hard work and quiet meditation. Maintaining the balance, the tension, the rhythm, is no simple matter. This text tempts us to nurture our stereotypes, to hear Jesus' words as a "put-down" of so-called women's work. Admonishing people who talent and inclination is more inclined toward "hands-on" activities than intellectual disciplines, suggesting that scholars are better Christians than carpenters or cooks. Of course, this is nonsense. What a

chaotic world we would have. And what puny and ineffective church we would have without the active involvement of Martha types. Doers, hands-on caregivers. But Jesus reminds us that the abundant life is not simply full pantries, comfortable surroundings, and good cooking. Beyond all this there is the "*one thing needful*"

So, I think we should see **this text as a sort of continuum**, with Mary and Martha as the two polarities, the two extremities. They represent faith as deeds, works of kindness, social concern and social action. And faith as meditation, contemplation, reflection and worship **None of is likely to be at either pole, but I suspect that the greater risk, for most of us, is to be distracted from the Word of God.** And like Martha, we are distracted by good things!

That's the **stinger in the text. Martha is doing good stuff!** These are responsible and necessary things. But the Lord insists that in this context she has her priorities twisted. Can we hear this? Can we apply this?

We are **such busy, driven people!** Google tells me that Americans consume 50 million aspirin tablets every day...that's 15 billion a year. Who knows how many Tylenol and Bufferin. Such figures would suggest that everyone in the country has a headache most of the time. In my experience, people in our culture are not so much interested in how they may get to heaven. What they are asking is "*how do I get through this day?*" In the early 1900's the top ten killers in this country were infectious diseases. In this new century the top-ten are all stress related. And we are not surprised. We feel such pressure to get things done. to be responsible hard-workers.

The **story is told of a bishop** who visited his friend, the pastor a small, quiet little country church. He asked his friend, "What *would you do if you looked up one day and saw Jesus walking toward your door?*" The pastor responded, "I'd try to look real busy!"

What is that makes us feel real guilty if we're not real busy? If we're not being super-responsible? And what a tragedy when our busyness, our worrying about what must be done, distracts us from giving attention to the Word of God! Hinders us from "being *still and knowing God?*" The axiom for this day. "***Don't just do something... sit there!***"

The great challenge in our spiritual journey is not about distinguishing good from evil. We seldom have difficulty knowing what is right...the struggle is about proportions. About dividing our time. Keeping our lives in balance. Making sure we are not majoring in minors.

In the business world people talk about "working *smart.*" Making sure you are not working lots of hours without being efficient, without getting much done. In this text Jesus is saying, "Martha, *get smart! There is a time to set a nice table, tend to human comforts, but now, in the shadow of my departure, as I set my face toward Jerusalem and cross, you have to get a grip on what important. It's time to focus on my Word, which is a word of life and joy, peace*

*and power. This is a Word without which all of life becomes dreary, dull and disastrous, no matter what we are having for dinner. Right now, I have to tell you, your sister Mary is working smart!*

**But we have to be very careful here.** It's too easy to interpret this text as simply an encouragement to set some time aside to read the Bible every day and be smart enough to be in church on Sunday. And spiritual refreshment becomes just another discipline, another duty, another should and ought, to burden our days.

Being in the Word is not just another duty or discipline, some rule to be obeyed. Jesus didn't rebuke Martha, telling her to put the crystal and china back in the cabinet just to trade one chore for another!

It's all about FREEDOM! To hear the Word is to be set free! Free from guilt. Free from worry. Free from death! Freedom from living our lives being intoxicated with busyness and accomplishment and getting ahead.

You see, this all runs the risk of sounding like some mini-course in time management until we understand that it's all about freedom! God's Word comes to us freely, like a surging, bubbling, never-ending stream in the desert, pouring into our lives a message of hope, joy and freedom through the mercies of Christ.

We immerse ourselves in his Word, not because it is our duty but because it sets us free. We are free from duty-oriented religion which measures spiritual achievement like a person writing a resume'. We are free to cast our burdens and our cares, our fears and our guilt on Christ, the burden-bearer. Freedom for ALL.

**This is the heart of God's Word.** This is why our Lord wants us to immerse ourselves in it. In Christ, you are free! Your place in God's kingdom is not limited by your accomplishments. not limited by your shameful past. There are no limits. You are free to be all you can be. Everything God created you to be. Free to live with Him and for Him, free to praise and thank him, serve and obey him. Free to reach out and touch someone in his name.

There is **so much that we ought to do and must do in this life.** But until we listen to the Word of the Lord, until the Spirit working through that Word releases us from our burdens and our dedication to busyness for its own sake. We will remain trapped in trivia, working ourselves to the bone and getting nowhere.

*O Lord, guide us, with Mary, to your feet, where in your Word we become free. Amen.*