

Luke 10:38–42

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 better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today's gospel lesson is a bit difficult for us to figure out. Over the years there have been many different ways to look at it. It is important to note that this little story about the two sisters Mary and Martha follows directly after last week's story of the Good Samaritan. It seems almost like Jesus is backtracking on what he had just said, because he seems to be praising Mary for sitting and listening to him and chiding Martha for working. So much for helping your neighbor, right? I don't think in the end that Jesus is actually saying that of course.

There have been many sermons in the past, and probably some will be heard in other churches today, that will explain that Jesus is saying that the contemplative life is better than the worldly active life. They will also say we should be more focused on learning about God, like Mary was, than worried about worldly things, like Martha making a meal. Although no one would deny that a contemplative life can be good we should not assume that is the only option; that we should pull ourselves away from the world. The rest of Jesus's teachings do not support that idea.

Another way that this lesson has been used is as a reprimand to women who have wanted to work in the church. Those who do this try to say that Jesus is telling the sisters, and anyone else who is listening to or reading this text, that women should be still and listen to the Word of God, but they shouldn't be acting on it. These people will usually expand this thought and say that women shouldn't be ministers, they shouldn't even have a voice in the church. I'm positive that is also NOT what Jesus was trying to say here.

I think instead this message is about keeping our selves focused. It also revolves around hospitality and what that really means. Remember that hospitality has been an important part of the Jewish, and for that matter Middle Eastern, tradition for thousands of years. In the Bible we can go all the way back to Genesis 18 where we read about Abraham welcoming three guests, who were actually angels, into his tent.

Hospitality meant providing food, water, shelter, and safety for those whom you welcomed. It also meant a show of respect to that person. And that is where we run into the root of the issue in today's lesson. Mary sits down at Jesus's feet and is listening to what he is saying. There is nothing wrong with this; in fact, it could easily be said that Mary is showing good hospitality by conversing/listening to what her guest has to say.

That isn't to say that it wasn't important for Martha to make food. A meal would be an expected sign of showing hospitality as well. The issue comes up when Martha gets upset that Mary is not helping her in the kitchen. Martha has certain expectations about what Mary should be doing and she is not fulfilling them. Not to mention that Martha is probably upset because she is doing the brunt of the work.

My wife is an amazing cook. When we were younger it made total sense to me that she should make dinner when she came home from work. Although I would occasionally make something for us every once in a while, I thought it would be best to just stay out of the way most of the time. One night she decided to see what would happen if she didn't make supper. I sat watching TV, and she sat down as well. An hour or two later I said, "well I'm getting hungry, we should make dinner." Her "hangry" thought at the time was, "It's going to take an hour to make dinner, we should have been doing this a long time ago." I'm guessing that we eventually had a little "conversation" about getting supper started before it was too late and how I could get the ball rolling.

When we came to Canby and Gen got her job at the bank, she wouldn't get home until pretty late, so I have taken over a good chunk of the supper meal preparation. One of the things that I've run into is that asking my kids for help usually ends up taking more time and effort than if I did it myself. Unless I'm trying to teach one of them how to make something specifically, about the only thing I'll ask for in the way of help is to get something from the freezer in the basement. They usually don't mess that up.

The biggest issue with what Martha does is that she starts to not view her hospitality work as a focus on their guest, but a worrisome duty that she must complete. She also is probably making the focus of the dinner on herself, and not on her guest. To make things worse she then decides to drag her guest into the situation by asking Jesus "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

This would be similar to me inviting you to my house, and while you are sitting waiting for dinner, I come into the room and say "Don't you think my wife should be helping me make dinner? Tell her that she should be cooking." I don't know about you, but if someone did that to me as a guest, I would feel a little uncomfortable. I might even feel like there was a serious disagreement going on and feel like you were trying to put me in the middle of it; a place that I would not appreciate being put.

Instead of putting her guest on the spot, if Martha had come in and asked Mary to help her things might have gone a lot differently. Jesus points out that what Mary is doing is important, not only because of hospitality rules, but she is learning from him. Not that making the meal isn't important but worrying so much about it and putting the focus on herself is the problem, instead of focusing on her guest and his needs.

I think that is the main thing we need to take away from today's scripture. It doesn't matter how we focus on God, it's that we are focusing on God. For those who are doing quiet contemplation, reading of scripture, and praying; great job, keep up the good work. For those who are working to make the world a better place in the name of the Lord by helping others, planting trees, and whatever else they might be doing that is good for the world; Kudos to you! But if the focus changes from, I am trying to be a reflection of God's light in the world, to I am doing this to make myself look good, no matter what "this" is, then there is a problem.

In the classic Billy Crystal movie "City Slickers," three longtime friends face middle age. In their middle-age crisis they find themselves losing their focus and in danger of losing their families.

To reignite the fire in their lives the guys sign up as "cowboys," helping a dude ranch move its herd of cattle from high in the hills down to the lower valley. "Curly," the grizzled old cowboy who leads them, seems to be the toughest, canniest, wisest person they have ever met. Billy Crystal asks the usually tight-lipped cowpoke what his secret is. What makes his life so

strong and centered and Curly smiles, raises his grubby, gloved index finger and proclaims, “It is just one thing,” then he rides away.

Billy’s character spends the rest of the movie frantically trying to figure out what Curly meant. What IS that “just one thing?”

Psychologists, marriage counselors, relationship gurus of all stripes, warn us not to expect one person to provide for all our emotional, intellectual, and relational needs. We need a variety of relationships, a network of spouses, friends, colleagues from work, basketball buddies, quilting club comrades, children, elders, and peers, to meet all our relational needs.

But what might be true for our human connections does not hold true for our spiritual needs. Our soul needs only “one thing.” No matter what your denomination. No matter if your spiritual temperament is exuberant, reserved, flamboyant, or meditative. Whether your soul craves cathedrals, or soars under the blue dome of the open sky, it is all the same as long as we have that “one thing.” That “one thing” is Jesus.

In today’s gospel text Martha, the mistress of the house, rushes around trying to make sure everything is perfect. Martha is acting like some first century Martha Stewart. She is focused on the food, the house, the drink. Martha seems to be doing for others. At first reading Martha is just being a conscientious hostess. But a deeper reading of the story reveals Martha is really only concerned with herself. How does HER house look? How does HER food taste? How are HER wines being served? Martha is so busy “serving” she completely forgets whom she truly serves.

We need to remember the focus of our work should always be on God, for God’s glory, and what God wants us to do. If we don’t, then we too will be like Martha; worried and distracted by the tasks and how we are perceived as we do them. Remember that in the end there is only need of one thing. Amen