

One Needful Thing

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

September 24, 2023 PM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Luke 10:38-42

Poor Martha. I know we are taught never to question what Jesus says, but be honest: haven't you sometimes felt that Jesus was a little hard on Martha here?

Martha had just come back from her committee meeting when she heard that Jesus was coming. She was a member of the Bethany Arts Council and they were planning their annual arts picnic. It was coming up next month, so it had been a long, exhausting meeting. There weren't a lot of go-getters on the committee this year, so as usual nothing seemed to happen unless she stepped up. On top of that, she had promised to deliver meals to the elderly tonight, something she had done for the last 6 years and was determined to continue even though it made her really busy. Sometimes she thought about pulling out but, she had a sense that the program depended on her and that if she dropped out the whole thing would fall apart. She'd invested way too much to let that happen!

But that didn't start till 6 and it was only 5 so she thought she'd put her feet up in the living room for 10 minutes before making dinner. But as she walked in the door she was met by her sister Mary who told her excitedly, "You'll never guess who's coming!!! Jesus! He's in town! He's on his way to Jerusalem and he'll be staying in Bethany tonight!!!" Martha knew what that meant. Guests! Rabbis in those days depended upon the hospitality of patrons; people in different towns who would put them up and feed them. In Bethany, Martha was Jesus' patron. When Jesus came to town he always stayed at the Martha Motel; he and all his traveling companions. Without blinking or thinking Martha put down the binder from the meeting and headed into the kitchen to begin preparations. "Let's see," she thought, "Jesus, 12 disciples, Lazarus her brother, Mary her sister, probably a few other friends, beds for everyone, food for everyone, drinks for everyone. This could take a while." Our text says it quite simply. Our text says it in 9 little words: "a woman named Martha opened her home to him." But don't be fooled, behind those words there would have been a mountain of work for an already busy woman.

There she is all alone in the kitchen. Mary is nowhere to be found, she's in the living room with the men. She can hear the murmur of Jesus' voice, she can hear the men laughing together, and high above the deep male laughter she can hear the sound of her sister's laugh. Martha was cutting up the food and keeping everyone's drink filled. She set out the snacks. She was the one keeping Peter and James away from the dessert tray. Meanwhile Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, having a good old time, listening, soaking it in, not a care in the world. Is there anyone here who cannot feel some sympathy for Martha when she goes into the living room to complain?

And, is there anyone here who isn't a little taken aback when Jesus defends Mary!?!? In this story Martha is the sacrificial one! Martha is the one giving herself for others! Isn't that what Christianity is about, self-sacrifice!? Is Mary being sacrificial? Is she giving herself for others? I don't think so. She's sitting at Jesus' feet drinking in his words. She's having the time of her life! How can Jesus condone Mary's life? If everyone chose Mary's way, who would eat, where would people sleep? Changing the world can't just be talk and ideas; someone needs to roll up their sleeves and do something!!!

The two women in this story could stand for two different approaches to the life of faith, two approaches that we've seen throughout church history. These two approaches are activism and contemplation. Martha represents the worker, the activist. Mary represents the contemplative, the mystic.

Since the beginning of the church there have been people who follow Jesus by engaging in a life of contemplation. There are people who spend a lot of time simply sitting at Jesus' feet. These are the contemplatives, the mystics. The most obvious representative members of this group are the monastic orders, the monks and nuns: Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, St John of the Cross, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, all the monks at St Gregory's Abbey down in Three Rivers, St Anthony and the desert monks of the 4th century; all these people are what we would call contemplatives. They are people who devote themselves to

quietly, privately seeking the face of God, people who spend hours in prayer and meditation. They follow in Mary's footsteps.

And while these contemplatives are fascinating people, like Martha, we've also wondered about them. Is it healthy to withdraw from the world like that, to spend your time in splendid isolation? Isn't it rather self-serving; resting in Jesus' presence while someone else deals with the world's problems? We know stories of monks who live in a cave in the desert for years and years and years, praying constantly, cut off from humanity. How helpful is that? I remember as a child hearing the story of Simon Stylites, the monk who devoted himself to God by sitting on a sixty-foot-high column for 30 years. To keep himself from falling off, he tied a rope around himself. Over time that rope began to eat into his flesh and according to his biographer the place where the rope was began to "Teem with worms." It's interesting stuff, but how is this helpful? "Lord my sister has left all the work to me! Tell her to come help me!" "Lord that man is doing no earthly good up on that pole, tell him to go work in a soup kitchen or something!" What good is all this contemplation?

And yet Jesus says of Mary: "She has chosen the better part. She has chosen the one thing needful!" How do we make sense of this odd situation? What is Jesus teaching us? Let's take a closer look.

First, it is clear that when Jesus rebukes Martha, he doesn't mean to say contemplation is always to be preferred over service. He doesn't mean to say that prayer is always to be preferred to work. That cannot be because in the passage right before ours, Jesus tells the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus just finished telling a parable which calls us to extend our time and our money and our energy and our compassion in service of others. The whole parable ends by Jesus saying to us, "Go and do likewise." It's a parable for workers and activists. It's a parable that sanctifies and encourages all the hardworking Martha's of the world.

So these two very different stories sit back to back; a story of doing and a story of being. And that's on purpose. These two stories occur back to back as a way to balance each other. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha need each other. If all we tell is the story of Mary and Martha, pretty soon no one is working at the soup kitchen, no one is willing to put together our Sunday night fellowship meals, no one is willing to wipe the glue off the tables when church school is done, and no one is willing to chaperone the middle school lock in.

If all we tell is the story of the Good Samaritan pretty soon we have a church full of anxious workaholics, people riding the edge of burnout, people who are convinced the world depends on their energy and organizational skills. We need both. Jesus teaches us a balance of work and contemplation, a balance of prayer and work, a balance of doing and being. Simon Stylites was wrong to sit on a pillar for 30 years with nothing but worms to show for it, but a life without some of his contemplation is a life out of balance.

Second, it would also be wrong to read this passage and say Martha is accomplishing something, and Mary isn't. Martha says "Jesus, Mary has left me to do all the work!" which means of course that as far as she can tell, her activity is productive, while this sitting at Jesus feet is consumptive. Martha is saying to Jesus, "Sitting at your feet and meditating on your words is pleasant, but it doesn't accomplish anything!" Martha is dead wrong about that. Martha may be making dinner, but when Mary sits at Jesus feet and listens, she is taking part in a revolution.

You see, when Martha starts getting dinner ready for everyone, she is doing exactly what was expected of women in those days. When men came to your house, when the rabbi and his disciples came to your house, you waited on them. That was what you did. Do you Biblical scholars here remember the story where Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law? It's a domestic classic. Right after he first meets Jesus, Peter takes Jesus home to his place. There he finds that his mother-in-law is sick with a high fever and he asks Jesus to help. Jesus heals his mother-in-law. Luke ends the story by saying, "As soon as the fever left her she got up and started waiting on everyone." Martha would be proud. Don't blame these women for their reactions. They were trying to be good people and do what was expected of them.

Mary is not doing what's expected of her. She is going far beyond. She's exploring a new role. When she sits at Jesus' feet, she is taking the role of a disciple; only the disciples sat at the master's feet and listened to the rabbi this way. And up to that point, disciples of the rabbi were virtually always men. To have a woman learning at the feet of the master, sitting there in the middle of the twelve men, this was radical stuff. And then Jesus not only condones what Mary's doing, when he says that Mary has chosen the better part, he effectively

invites Martha to sit at his feet too! “Hey Martha! Dinner can wait. I know you can make a meal. I know you can make a bed. But come here and have a seat because there are new things for you to learn.”

Contemplation is not a neutral, innocuous activity. Deep contemplation of Jesus, intense prayer...it can be revolutionary. When you contemplate the Lord of heaven, the one in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, the one who said the last shall be first and the first shall be last, the one who says “Behold I make all things new”, when you meditate on him, who knows what sort of new directions might be explored? Who knows what idols might be cast down from their thrones? Who knows what great movements of the Spirit might be unleashed on the world? There is nothing more dangerous, nothing more transforming, nothing more radical, nothing more productive than time spent quietly at the feet of Jesus. It is an activity that shapes the soul. It’s an activity that changes the world.

One of the great mystics was St. Anthony the desert monk. He went into the desert for 20 years to contemplate his Lord. But his contemplation finally led him back. After his 20 years he came back and taught and spoke and led and counseled all over the world. People of power sought his advice. Even the emperor wanted an audience with him.

Some of you have maybe heard the name Frank Laubach. He is a famous 20th century contemplative. He wrote a book called “Letters of a Modern Mystic,” a book in which he records his rigorous and detailed attempts to always be in the presence of God. He literally tried to think of Jesus and pray to Jesus during every minute of his life. But he wasn’t some ivory tower crazy. Frank Laubach was one of the leading advocates for literacy and education at the beginning of the 20th century. He met with kings and generals, presidents and prime ministers from all over the developing world. Contemplation can be very productive.

Third and last, it must be said that while Jesus wants us to keep work and prayer in balance, when it comes right down to it, prayer comes first, sitting at his feet comes first. It is the one thing needful, says Jesus. The water for this life, the hope for this life doesn’t come from our work, it doesn’t come from long hours in committee meetings, it doesn’t come from long hours in the office, it comes from Jesus.

Gerrit Keizer wrote about this passage and wondered, what would have happened if Martha had ignored the preparation of the food and had instead sat down with Mary at Jesus’ feet? How would that have gone? Well they would have talked into the night. They would have enjoyed an evening full of laughter and learning! Eventually of course people would start to get hungry. And Martha would have jumped up and ran to the kitchen to get some bread, and I imagine Jesus might have said, “O no Martha, please! Let Me! And he would have taken the loaf, and he would have given thanks, and broken it, and (you know how that goes) somehow everyone would have had enough. The water for our life, the hope for our life, the bread of life doesn’t come from our work, it’s not something we break, it’s not something we make, it’s something we receive with open hands at the feet of Jesus.

Congregation, congregation... I know you are worried and upset about many things. And heaven knows there is plenty to worry about. Your business, your job. Your precarious health. A child who’s wandering away. A world that full of precarious angers. A marriage that’s falling apart. A denomination that’s struggling. And on top of it all, there are groceries to buy and someone needs to clean the house and make dinner, for heaven’s sake. We are worried and upset by many things. And when the worries pile up what do we do? The temptation is of course to rev up your inner Martha: set your alarm clock earlier, stay up later than ever, work your fingers to the bone.

But Jesus says, “Stop for a second. Sit down at my feet and be quiet. Take a deep breath and listen. I love you. My love is the strongest thing in your life. Terrible things will happen to you in this world, but don’t be afraid: nothing that happens to you will be too big for me to overcome. I would give my life for you, and nothing can separate you from my love.” That’s the one thing needful. And as Jesus himself tells us, it will not be taken away.

©Rev. Peter Jonker