

“ONLY ONE THING!”

Luke 10:38–42

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When I was in seminary at Boston University School of Theology, William Sloane Coffin was the Chaplain at Yale. This noted preacher and prominent Christian activist came to preach at our seminary chapel on several occasions. Following chapel, Coffin would meet with us for coffee and discussion. I remember the time someone asked him a question concerning his interpretation of a certain Scripture. Coffin replied with words that have become famous, ***“I do not believe that every word of the Bible is literally true; I believe it is eternally true.”***

The Bible is never more eternally true than in today’s Lectionary reading from Luke’s Gospel! True to life, relevant from generation to generation, the story of Mary and Martha is a classic tale of sibling rivalry. Here is hard-working Martha slaving over a hot stove, while her lazy, or at least inconsiderate, sister Mary sits in the living room engaged in conversation.

Martha began her day with a “to do” list as long as your arm. In fact, she was awake before the alarm went off. Just thinking about all that she needed to do made her more than a little anxious. After all, company was coming, and she needed to have everything ready. She was at the market before the vendors got there in order to get her fresh produce. She had been baking and cooking all day. There was the house to sweep; finishing touches to preparing the table, including fresh flowers. After all, it wasn’t every day that Jesus came to eat a meal in their home. Besides that, John’s Gospel tells us that Mary and Martha had a brother named Lazarus. This was the Lazarus that Jesus had raised from the dead. Martha was so grateful for what Jesus had done that she would have done anything for him in order show her gratitude. Fixing a nice meal was the least she could do. She certainly wanted to put her best foot forward.

Wouldn’t you think my sister would give me a hand, she thought to herself as she kneaded the dough for the homemade bread and washed the vegetables? Wouldn’t you think she’d care what the house looks like? The more Martha thought about it, the more irritated she became. When Jesus came to the door, Martha greeted him warmly, then politely retired to the kitchen to finish cooking the meal. Mary, on the other hand, acted as though she didn’t have a care in the world, and simply plopped herself down at the feet of Jesus, taking in every word.

Finally, Martha could hold her tongue no longer. All of a sudden she burst into the room, interrupting conversation by blurting out, ***“Lord, haven’t you noticed that my sister has left me in the kitchen to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!”***

Now we can relate to that story. Any of us who have brothers and sisters know what it’s like to have to do more than our share. My mom used to tell about how after supper, she and her sister were assigned to do the dishes. My mom always had an agenda. She wanted to get the dishes done as fast as possible so she could get on with other things. So she would start right in. But her sister would always manage to get into conversation with someone at the table or disappear until most of the work was done. How do some people get away with it? Sibling

rivalry, you see. Life is not fair. Mom always liked you best, or so it seemed. Dad always let you get away with murder. “Why should I have to do all the work myself? Tell her to come and help me!”

Are you a Mary or a Martha? I’m not going to ask for a show of hands, but how many of you get up in the morning with a “to do” list, and then check things off, one by one? How many like to plan your work and then work your plan? Or are you the type that gets up in the morning and says, “I wonder what the Lord has planned for me today?” Will anything interesting happen? I need to set aside time for reflection and prayer. Are you like Martin Luther, who said, “I have so much to do today I will have to spend several hours in prayer in order to accomplish what God is calling me to do.”

When you have the opportunity to get away, do you take a Mary vacation or a Martha one? Some people leave at 5:30 in the morning and drive 800 miles the first day they are on the road. When they fly to Europe, they try to see six countries in six days. They attempt to engage in every outdoor sport at least once during their two week vacation. “Rest?” they say. “I can rest when I get back from vacation. Sleep? I can do that at home!”

Other people take a “Mary” vacation. They want to get away from it all. For them, a great vacation is lying upon a beach somewhere and doing absolutely nothing. They are into serenity, contemplation and quiet relaxation. That’s their idea of a vacation.

Personally, my ideal vacation is at the ocean sitting on a deck chair in the water, with the waves washing up over my feet. The biggest decision I want to make is which restaurant to go to for supper. I lead enough of a Martha life that those Mary experiences really appeal to me. But I have to be careful. I love to read, and I don’t get much uninterrupted time for reading during the regular season. So I try to “catch up” on vacation. One year we planned to be gone two weeks and I confess that I took eight books along to read! Martha won! I managed to read all eight books!

Now pastors need to be part Mary and part Martha. We have to be organized, goal-oriented, moving forward, getting the job done. They tell you in seminary that you are your own boss. That’s true to a point. But if you don’t organize the job, the job soon overwhelms you, and eventually does you in. As a District Superintendent, the thing that I observed about the pastors I supervised was not a lack of sincerity or commitment or problems with their theological beliefs. Most pastors were well-intentioned and orthodox in their beliefs and committed to the faith. But some had real trouble finding a balance between the Martha and the Mary. A pastor has got to organize the week knowing that a sermon is required by the end of that week. Constructing sermons is both a public and a private endeavor. It is important to listen to people, to interact with the congregation, to find out what concerns people and what makes them tick. Yet it is also important for a preacher to be alone in quiet and in study and in prayer.

A pastor needs to be available to people in at their time of need. You’ve got to be willing to go to the hospital emergency room in the middle of the night when there is some tragedy in the congregation. You’ve got to schedule your day so there is time to meet with people who need pastoral support and guidance. That’s Martha. And yet, a pastor must also be like Mary. It takes prayer and contemplation to lead a congregation. While I enjoy interacting with people, and I thrive on relationships that are deep and meaningful, I find that I also must have time when I am absolutely quiet and absolutely alone. Someone has said that Mahatma Gandhi always spent two or three days in complete silence for every day he spent leading a religious and political movement in public. The silence enabled him to reconstitute himself.

As I say, part of me is like Martha --- busy, organized, task-oriented, moving forward, getting the job done. But part of me is like Mary --- quiet, reflective, scholarly, and simply sitting there, reflecting.

Do you find that is also true for you? The Christian life often involves times of feverish activity. We are called to action on behalf of others, both in acts of service with individuals and in the larger sphere where social action is demanded. But the Christian life also involves times of quiet meditation. In fact, I think many of you could testify that the harder you work following Christ, the more of your life you dedicate to his service, the more tough assignments you take on --- the more desperately you need times of quiet and reflection, times of prayer and times of worship.

Jesus appears to be taking sides with Mary in this family squabble. But I think we need to look at the story again. I think we do this story a disservice if we interpret it in such a way that we contrast one sister with the other. The challenge for us this morning is not to decide which of the sisters got discipleship right. I believe the message here is not that Martha is doing something wrong and Mary is doing something right. The struggle is not between Martha, the busy bee who can't sit still long enough to enjoy Jesus and Mary, who is the adoring, perfect disciple who sits quietly at Jesus' feet hanging on every word.

The issue is that **Martha has become distracted**. She has gotten so consumed by her work that she has forgotten why she is doing what she is doing. She has lost her focus. She has become preoccupied with the business at hand. Jesus does not criticize Martha for her work. He does not chide her for being in the kitchen. He criticizes her for becoming distracted and for worrying that the work will not get done.

When I have a lot to do, sometimes I get so concerned over the length of my "to do" list that I get a headache or a stomach ache just thinking about all I have to do. I have said it before, and I need to say it again, to you and I need to listen to it myself: **Worrying is un-Christian**. If we trust in God, there is nothing to worry about. If we believe in Jesus, there is no need to worry. God will take care of us. Yet, like Martha, we are anxious and troubled about many things. We become distracted, preoccupied and lose focus.

Jesus says, "You need **only one thing**, Martha. You need **only one thing**, Mary." And the one thing you need is this: to stop and listen to voice of Jesus.

Those who want to criticize Martha for being in the kitchen working away forget or conveniently ignore the fact that this story comes right on the heels of the story of the Good Samaritan. In that classic tale, the one who is Christlike, the one who demonstrates neighborliness, the one who shows compassion is the one who stops and helps the traveler who is in need. A "good Samaritan" is one who notices that someone has been beaten up and left along the side of the road and stops to help.

In today's story, the one Jesus lifts up is the one who stops to listen to what Jesus has to say. How many of us Marthas think we already know what Jesus has to say and simply rush into action? How many of us ask God to bless what we are already doing and what we intend to do next, rather than ask what God wants us to do? How many of us need to be reminded that there is more to life than getting it all done; that God does not intend that we enslave ourselves to custom and role?

The common thread running between the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha is this business about stopping. Sometimes before we can accomplish something we first have to stop. Stop what we are doing. Stop what we are assuming. Stop our

agenda. Turn off the cell phone. Turn off the television. Turn off whatever is distracting us, keeping us preoccupied, whatever has caused us to lose focus.

Sometimes we just have to stop and listen for the voice of Jesus. ***“Be still and know that I am God,”*** the Psalmist says (Psalm 46:10). Many times at the end of my sermons I say something to the effect of “Don’t just sit there, do something!” This morning I believe Jesus is saying to Mary and to Martha and to us, “Don’t just do something, sit there!” ***“Be still and know that I am God.”*** Put your “to do” list away and listen. Listen for my voice. Listen to what God may be saying to you today.

Jesus told Martha that she needed one thing. What is the one thing you need from Jesus this morning? Not what do you need in order to accomplish what you want to do, or what one thing do you need in order to get everything on your list checked off. But what one thing do you need in order to be the person God wants you to be and to do what God wants you to do?

Don’t just do something, sit there! Sit quietly with your hands and your heart open to what God has for you today. Will you stop? Will you listen to Jesus?

Prayer: Dear God, help us to stop and listen for your voice (pause). Help us to stop and listen, not only today, but every day. Amen.