

Luke 10 v38-42

‘Only One Thing’

Prayer

Introduction ...

How does that gospel reading leave you feeling?

If you had to choose a part to play ... would it be Mary or Martha ... or would it be Jesus or one of the disciples? Where does your sympathy lie?

As soon as Jesus (and presumably his disciples) enter the house, Martha busies herself with the practical work of hospitality — cleaning, organizing, cooking, and serving. Her sister, Mary, meanwhile, sits at Jesus’s feet, listening to all he says with rapt attention, and paying no heed to her harried sister.

Debie Thomas comments:

We have no idea how long Martha’s patience holds ... maybe she spends a good hour or two in the kitchen, banging pot lids around to express her displeasure, but soon enough she boils over, and storms into the dining room to confront 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.”

But Jesus, instead of chiding Mary or offering Martha the recognition she craves, answers thus: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.”

I wonder if the disciples were thinking “Oh no ... bang goes our hope of supper”

When I read Jesus’s words to Martha, my first response is irritation, and my second is disappointment. Yes, Jesus elevated the status of women by affirming Mary’s right to discipleship. (Traditionally, only male disciples sat at their Teacher’s feet to study the Torah). This gender reversal is a *huge* deal, and I don’t take it for granted.

And yet. I wish Jesus had done more. I wish he’d rounded up his (male) disciples, ushered them into the kitchen, and directed *them* to bake the bread, fry the fish, and chop the vegetables — all while Martha took a much needed nap. I wish he’d said, “Peter, you wash the dishes. James and John, you put away the leftovers. Judas, get the beds made. Andrew, you’re on sweeping and mopping duty, and the rest of you: go ask the women what else they need done. Oh, and in case you boys are wondering: this “girlie” stuff isn’t a prelude to the sacred. This stuff *IS* the sacred.”

Jesus’ words seem so unbalanced Nothing along the lines of “Martha, come and sit with us and then we’ll all help and get the meal ready ...” Don’t we need both contemplation and action?

Well, yes – and that’s perhaps why this passage in Luke’s gospel is sandwiched between the parable of the Good Samaritan ... love in action ... and the Lord’s Prayer ... contemplation

But today’s passage is *not* about balance. It’s the opposite. The story is about choosing the one thing, the *best* thing — and forsaking everything else for its sake. The story is about single-mindedness. It’s not about being reasonable; it’s about being wildly, madly, and deeply in love with Jesus.

Perhaps Martha’s mistake was that she assumed she could invite Jesus into her life, and then carry on with that life as usual, maintaining control, privileging her own priorities, and clinging to her long-cherished agenda and schedule.

In contrast, Mary recognized that Jesus’s presence in her house required a radical shift. A role change. A wholehearted surrender. Why? Because Jesus was no ordinary guest. PTO

He was the Guest who would be Host. The Host who would provide the bread of life, the living water, and the wine that was his own blood, to anyone who would sit at his feet and receive his hospitality.

It's easy to lose sight of Mary. Perhaps we tend to associate single-mindedness only with activity. **I wonder what the prevailing culture will be by the time Thomas* enters the world of work? Maybe this passage could become a guide for him! (* Thomas Henry is the baby baptised today)**

Our lives can be work-frenzied, performance-driven. We may end up believing that pondering, listening, waiting, and resting have no value. In our age of cynicism, it's easy to roll our eyes at spiritual single mindedness. In a world that is profoundly broken and unjust, it's easy to argue that we should leave contemplation to the monastics, and throw all of our time and energy into social engagement. To be clear: we *are* called to work for justice. We are called to bring liberty to the oppressed and comfort to the afflicted. But every "work" we do must begin, Jesus insists, from "only one thing." It must begin with him. It must begin at his feet.

And notice - Jesus didn't criticise Martha for her work of hospitality. It was not her cooking, cleaning, or serving that bothered him.

Notice the actual problem he named: "Martha, Martha, you are *worried and distracted* by many things."

The root meaning of the word "worry" is "strangle" or "seize by the throat and tear." The root meaning of the word "distraction" is "a separation or a dragging apart of something that should be whole." **These are such strong words. Words that indicate a wound, a fracture or a state of mind that renders us incoherent, divided, and un-whole.**

Jesus found Martha in just such a state of fragmentation — a condition in which she could not enjoy his company, savour his presence, find inspiration in her work, receive anything he wished to offer her, or show him genuine love.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Are you or I too busy to give and to receive love? Are you or I quick to seethe? Have our distractions become an affront to the people we long to be with? Is our worry keeping us from being fully present, fully engaged, fully alive?

Have we lost the ability to attend? To linger? To delve deep?

Are we using a packed schedule ... or anything else to avoid intimacy with God or with others?

My answer to some of these questions is yes. If yours is yes, too, then I wonder if we can hear Jesus's words to Martha, not as a criticism, but as an invitation. Not as a rebuke, but as a soothing balm. Jesus knows that we ache to be whole. Jesus knows that we can place brutal and devastating expectations on ourselves.

Martha longed to sit where Mary sat. She longed to take delight in Jesus's words. She longed to surrender her heavy burden and allow Jesus to host her. Maybe we long for these good things, too.

Here's the good news: There is need of only one thing, and if we choose it, no one will ever have the power to take it away from us. So let's choose it. Jesus our Host is waiting.

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[Journey with Jesus - Only One Thing](#)