

ONLY ONE THING IS NEEDED

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Luke 10: 38-42

The passage we just heard follows the parable of The Good Samaritan when Jesus is asked by a lawyer what he must do to inherit eternal life. The lawyer is an expert in the requirements of Torah. He understands what God requires of his people: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” But then he asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” We sense a problem. He is full of knowledge—but his understanding of who his neighbor is, reflects his limited comprehension of doing what God asks of us, not simply knowing it. We can all identify with this disconnect between knowing a truth and practicing that truth. The story of Jesus’ visit to the home of Martha and Mary examines a different problem. Martha Langford preached on the Good Samaritan text last week using the title, “Mercy.” The title of this sermon could be: “Courage.” The truth of that will eventually become clear.

Martha was a model disciple. She was devoted to service. You will recall that in the Gospel of John, chapter 11, Martha is the first one out of the house to greet Jesus when he arrives, too late, to heal Lazarus. In spite of Jesus’ delay and her brother, Lazarus’ death, Martha states, before Lazarus is raised from the dead by Jesus, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Martha understood who Jesus was, and she understood his command to serve others. But she had her own shortcomings. She could lose focus on Jesus while serving him and focus instead on her own worries and anxiety. She then generalizes about her sister’s behavior and misunderstands the meaning of that behavior. Mary wants to hear what Jesus can teach her. Martha interprets Mary’s behavior to mean: She doesn’t want to help me; she doesn’t care.

You’ve seen your child or husband or wife involved in some activity at home when you wanted that person to pay attention to something you felt was more important. “Would you please listen to me,” you might say, or “Would you please get up and help me; you can see that I have a lot to do, and you’re just sitting there.” Behind this is often a misunderstanding of the importance of the other person’s behavior to them. And perhaps there is even a generalization about the character of the other person: “You are so lazy and irresponsible!” This happens in the workplace as well and can lead to many misunderstandings and workplace tension. It is so easy to misread another person’s intentions, and we all do it.

Martha took her responsibilities as a host very seriously. The text says that she welcomed Jesus into her home shortly after he entered her village. She needed to buy food (no refrigeration) and prepare and cook it (which meant getting a fire started). She really needed Mary's help. Moreover, Mary's place in those social times was in the kitchen, not sitting at the feet of the rabbi, a place reserved for men. Mary was rebelling against social norms and, in Martha's eyes, being irresponsible. Martha did what I suspect any of us would have done in that situation, she turned to Jesus, who carried authority and whom she respected greatly, and asked for his support in getting Mary back to work.

It is important to understand that Jesus loved Martha. He also, no doubt, appreciated her hospitality. But he recognizes that she is allowing her emotions to cloud her ability to understand Mary's perspective. Mary is disregarding social norms and taking a big risk because she needs to hear what Jesus is saying. She will not let social expectations keep her from hearing words of truth about the meaning and purpose of her life, indeed, the meaning and purpose of all life. Somehow she knows that this is not some ordinary teacher. She is in the presence of the one who gives life. You will recall that Mary, in John 12, anoints Jesus feet with costly perfume and wipes them with her hair. Clearly, Jesus had been a transforming presence in her life, and it was her boldness at the house on that day he first visited that enabled her to hear words from Jesus she might otherwise have never heard. After Mary anoints Jesus' feet, he again excuses Mary's behavior. The questioner in John 12 was a disciple. Judas asks why the money spent on the perfume wouldn't have been better spent helping the poor. Shouldn't we be using our resources for social justice and not for extravagant acts of love for one person? Jesus' response: "Leave her alone." This response is similar to his response to Martha at the house. Jesus is not critical of Martha's discipleship and hospitality. He chides her for being distracted by social expectations that interfere with her having a meaningful encounter with him and threaten to interfere with Mary's encounter as well.

So, what do we think Mary is listening for? When Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the "better part," what does he mean? Might the "better" part be that which is the source of love and goodness in every person? God speaks a word to which she and we must listen. Then armed with understanding we are called to put aside our shortcomings and limitations to be instruments of God's grace: co-creating with God a world of justice, mercy, and peace. How tragic if we could not depend on hearing these words of grace! This morning's reading from Amos highlights the value of Jesus' words, in case we might take them for granted. Through Amos the Lord God speaks of a judgment on the people when they will no longer be able to "hear the words of the Lord." Because of corrupt business practices in ancient Israel that oppressed the poor and needy, God withdrew his words. The people "shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it." [Amos 8: 12] This is a frightening prospect: that the liberating words of life would be unavailable to us. Mary recognizes that the word of the Lord is coming from the mouth of Jesus. She discerns that these are words she needs to hear, and she does not let social

convention stand in her way. In the same way, we shouldn't let social attitudes or conventions hinder us or others from hearing and responding to God's word.

What is Jesus saying that grabs Mary's attention? It could be anything, but Jesus is not anybody. His words are God's word to Mary. They are words that call individuals like Mary and you and me into being when we despair about our weak faithfulness to God. I believe Jesus was communicating to Mary God's acceptance of her. He was communicating God's love and God's mercy, which renewed her hope. These are words we must all listen for to thwart despair and give meaning and purpose to our lives. We hear these words, I would suggest, when we recognize Jesus Christ in the midst of relationships that open our eyes to God's love. The circumstances may violate societal norms, but the experience is affirming of human dignity and feels right and good. Jesus is the host of those experiences, just as he is the host at the Lord's Supper.

In her home Martha believed that she was the host, and she was distracted by the responsibility of providing for Jesus and those who were traveling with him. Because of her distractions, she failed to recognize that the true host was the person she was serving. She wanted to serve faithfully, but she failed to be in communion with the source of life and love. What might have happened had she followed Mary's lead, rather than criticizing her for ignoring her duties? Perhaps Martha recognized Jesus' power as the true host if he later broke bread at the meal she had prepared, just as the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus not in the words he spoke but in his breaking of the bread. But Mary needed only to hear Jesus' words, and she knew that her life was being renewed and restored as a child of God. Listen to these words of Jesus in John's Gospel (8: 31-32): "If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free."

Though Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh, he sent the Holy Spirit so that we could be renewed and restored through others who manifest Christ for us. Who are these people? How can we recognize them? When we take charge and establish rules for behavior that blind us to the prophetic witness of people around us, we run the risk of losing Mary's perception that the real host in her midst is Jesus and not her sister. Social conventions may keep us from recognizing the real host who is serving us and restoring us to life. When we serve others in the name of Christ we must be alert to Christ's presence **in them**.

At the recent 222nd General Assembly meeting in Portland last month a resolution passed for the expression of regret for past words and actions of the PC(USA) toward LGBTQ persons. This was an admission that the church and all of us who refused to see Christ in them had failed to hear God's words when spoken to us in a non-traditional context. We employed biblical texts out of context in order to see Christ in us but not in them. Communion in and with Christ removes barriers between Us and Them so that we experience the grace manifest in community. Jesus might have taken offense when Mary sat at his feet with the men. He was

certainly aware of social conventions and biases, but he ignored those things, and took no offense.

You will remember the white gunman who killed nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston after joining a Bible study there. Dylann Roof had listened for almost an hour as the dozen members of the group explored a passage from the Gospel of Mark before he stood up and started shooting. A few weeks after that another white man walked into a Bible study at another AME church in Bluffton, South Carolina: Campbell Chapel. He had no idea why his presence caused anxiety among those present, but he was not asked to leave. AME church leaders had asked its pastors to use a litany after the Charleston massacre entitled, "Our Doors are Open." The pastor at the Campbell Chapel took those words seriously, even though the pastor killed in Charleston had been a dear friend and mentor. He knew that being a follower of Jesus Christ requires taking risks to welcome the stranger. Listening to the words of life is no guarantee that they will be heard. But the members of the Bible study at Campbell Chapel in Bluffton resisted the natural impulse to assume that the young man who had joined their study had the same intentions as Dylann Roof. The natural inclination would have been to call the police as a preventive measure. But for the Christian being in communion with the stranger is being in communion with Christ—even if it might get you killed.

When Jesus enters the home of Martha and Mary, he brings a transforming presence. Initially a stranger, then a guest, he becomes the host. His are the accepting, forgiving words of life. There is still evil and darkness. Welcoming the stranger carries risk. Even in a safe environment, we, like Martha, are easily distracted by many worries—financial worries, social expectations, pressing requirements. But we must be vigilant to recognize when the word of the Lord is in our midst. It may not be in the mouth of a preacher or a theology professor. It may be in the mouth of the stranger—someone we perceive as "other"-- who needs to be welcomed into communion with us. In these moments, when the stranger becomes Us, we may find our hearts opened and discover Jesus at the table, where all are welcomed. Amen.