

The One Thing

Luke 10:38-42

Encountering Jesus Today

By Dave Urbanski

The passage we covered this past Sunday — Luke 10:38-42 — is short and sweet and packed with crucial significance.

Let's have another look at it in full:

“Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.’”

I love this passage — and it challenges all of us.

So, who do you most identify with? Martha or Mary? Or are you somewhere in between?

Pastor Scott emphasized that it's important to not paint Martha as “less than” compared to Mary because both of them love Jesus and believe in him. Nevertheless it's instructive to realize that Martha's busyness and task orientation is getting in the way of what Jesus calls the “one thing” that is “necessary” — since all of us to one degree or another can find ourselves limiting the time we spend in communion with Jesus because of a productivity mindset.

This is true even if we don't primarily identify with Martha since there will be times in all of our lives when tasks take over — and threaten to sideline our time with the Lord.

I very much appreciated Pastor Scott's vulnerable and humorous disclosure that the passage “stepped on” his toes a bit, since he most identifies with Martha. In some ways I do as well. Like Pastor Scott, I have my “piles” of stuff and ever-present “to-do” lists that remind me what needs to get done.

But do I use the tasks in front of me as an excuse to not take part in the “one thing” that is “necessary”? Yes, I do. (And I’m not even that great at getting those tasks done in a timely manner in the first place!)

Among the phrases in this passage that hits me right between the eyes is, “But Martha was distracted with much serving.”

Serving? Really? Isn’t “serving” and “service” high up on the list of things Christians are to take part in? Of course! But what’s so interesting here is that Martha is obsessed with serving Jesus — doing things *for* him. However, that’s not what’s most important to Jesus. Apparently he’s not a God who sits back and loves most of all others serving him. Make no mistake, we certainly *are* to serve the Lord and be in his service — but it’s quite apparent from this passage that what’s MOST important to Jesus is that we sit at his feet and listen to him. Communion. Connection. Intimacy. Love — and devoid of visual proof (to yourself and to others) that you love the Lord because you do things for him.

Jesus also tells Martha that she’s “anxious and troubled about many things.”

Those words of Jesus hit me hard, too. And they relate directly with what Pastor Scott shared in the beginning of his message. The tendency to be “anxious and troubled about many things” quite often is what it means to live life as an adult. You name it, and we’re worried about it.

But Pastor Scott offered the secret to upending our cycle of being anxious and troubled — and again, it’s what Jesus calls the one necessary thing: Staying close to Jesus and listening to him. That’s the state we must continually return to — as opposed to continually returning to our day-to-day productivity — and it will put our “to-do lists” in perspective. Our cares and worries and anxieties and troubles become less important. Not that we ignore them; on the contrary, we meet them head on — but with Jesus right next to us as we listen to what he’s telling us. Our “one thing” helps us with all other things.

The last several words Jesus speaks in the passage got my mind and heart going, too: He tells Martha that Mary’s “one thing ... will not be taken away from her.” What does that mean? I do wonder if it relates to the works and tasks that we take part in every day compared to our far-less measurable devotion to the Lord. The difference between “I love you, Lord!” and “Look what I did for you, Lord!”

Of course, if we're too much like Mary and completely ignoring things that need to get done, that's not good, either. We can't use being like Mary as an excuse to let our lives fall apart. There's a balance.

As Pastor Scott said, let us practice self-control in this way — and while doing so always remember to place our “one thing” at the forefront.