

One

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
July 22, 2007*

Luke 10:38-42

With his disciples, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to an appointment with destiny.

As they traveled, he entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him. Now, she had a sister, called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said. But Martha was pulled away by all the preparations. She came and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to make the preparations alone? Tell her to help me."

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you're concerned and troubled about many things, when you only need one thing. Mary chose the good portion. It won't be taken away from her."

Children's Story

"Sammy, I'm going to Boulder Woods tomorrow morning. Come with me." It was Milton the Muskrat.

This was great! Sammy had always looked up to Milton the Muskrat. And he gave his answer right away. "Sure, Milton," he said. "I'd love to go with you to Boulder Woods."

Sammy got up early the next morning, ate breakfast, combed his tail, and ran off to meet Milton.

That's when he remembered that he hadn't picked up his breakfast dishes. So Sammy turned around, ran home, and picked up. Then he combed his tail again and ran off to meet Milton.

That's when he remembered the pile of acorns he needed to put away in his family's hollow tree. So Sammy turned around again, ran home, and took care of the acorns. Then he combed his tail and ran off to meet Milton.

That's when he remembered his math homework. So Sammy turned around a third time, ran home, and did his homework. Then he combed his tail again and ran off to meet Milton.

Only, by the time he met Milton, it was too late to go to Boulder Woods. In fact, Milton had already gone to Boulder Woods and come back.

"Maybe next time," Sammy said to Milton.

"Well, we'll see about that," Milton said. "We'll see."

Sermon

Time was running out. Jesus was making his last journey. He wasn't traveling in a straight line. As Luke reports it, the road seems to turn and twist and double back on itself. But the destination is clear: Jerusalem. Whatever road Jesus was on, it was leading to Jerusalem. Jerusalem loomed ahead of Jesus as both destination and destiny. He knew what lay in store. Listen to Luke 18: "[Jesus] took the twelve aside and said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him., and on the third day he will rise again'" (vv. 31-33 NRSV). The story of Jew and Gentile would coalesce in Jerusalem upon Jesus. But his disciples did not understand. Luke says further, "[The disciples] understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said" (v. 34). Did nobody "get it"? Did nobody have a clue about who Jesus was, about where he was heading, about what lay in store?

Well, there was Mary. We meet Mary three times in the Gospels. Each time she is at the feet of Jesus. When her brother Lazarus dies, Mary kneels at Jesus's feet and pours out her sorrow to him. The day before Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph, Mary pours perfume on his feet and lets down her hair to wipe them. And when Martha welcomes Jesus to their home — that's today's story — Mary sits at his feet, an eager disciple, drinking in her teacher's words. The famine of hearing God's words (cf. Amos 8:11-12) was over.

Mary is "clued in" in a way that others aren't. When she perfumes Jesus's feet, Judas complains about the waste. "That perfume could have been sold, and the money given to the poor," he said. But Jesus said, "You will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me" (John 12:5,8). Mary knew that. So she prayed to Jesus (cf. John 11:32); she worshiped Jesus (cf. John 12:3); she listened to Jesus (cf. Luke 10:39). Mary never left his feet, because time was running out.

After his resurrection, Jesus said to another Mary, "Don't hold on to me" (John 20:17). This Mary won't let go of Jesus, and Jesus commends her: "Mary chose the good portion. It won't be taken away from her" (v. 42). Jesus will be taken. But while he remains, Mary may hang on to him.

Then there was Martha. We meet Martha three times in the Gospels. Each time she's busy, or business-like. When her brother Lazarus dies, Martha goes out to meet Jesus and has a theological discussion with him. It sounds like a negotiation. The day before Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph, Martha is busy looking after all the dinner arrangements. And when she welcomes Jesus into the family home — that's today's story — Martha can't seem to stay close to her guest. The demands of hospitality pull her away. I don't know if Martha was the firstborn, but she appears to be burdened by a firstborn's sense of responsibility.

It's not that Martha is clueless. She knows Jesus could have saved Lazarus (cf. John 11:21). She knows Jesus is the Messiah, who has come at last (cf. John 11:27). And she wants to sit right next to Mary at Jesus's feet. She wants to drink in Jesus's words. She, too, is ready for the famine to be over.

But there were so many preparations to look after. If she didn't look after things, who would? So she did look after things — though a little help would have been nice. She asked Jesus to prod Mary a bit: "Tell her to get up and help me" (cf. v. 40). If Mary pitched in, the work would be done sooner. Then both of them could sit at Jesus's feet. At least, that's the story she told herself.

The contrast between Mary and Martha is like that between the Mexican fisherman and the American businessman in the following story:

While he was standing on the pier of a Mexican fishing village, an American businessman saw a small boat dock. The boat held one fisherman and three yellowfin tuna. The businessman complimented the fisherman on the quality of his catch. Then he asked, "How long did it take you to catch those fish?" The fisherman said, "Only a little while." The businessman asked, "Why don't you stay out longer and catch more fish?" To which the fisherman replied, "I have enough to take care of my family." Then the businessman asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?" And the fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife Maria, then stroll into the village each evening to sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, señor."

The businessman scoffed, "I have a Harvard MBA. I can help you. If you spend more time fishing, you can make enough money to buy a bigger boat. With a bigger boat, you can make enough money to buy another boat and another and another — until you have a fleet of fishing boats. With your own fleet, you can bypass fish wholesalers and sell your catch directly to large customers. After that, you can open a cannery and control everything from sea to supermarket. And as your business expands, you can leave this village and move to Mexico City. Then to L.A. And eventually to New York."

"But señor," the fisherman asked, "how long will this all take?" The businessman replied, "Fifteen to twenty years." The fisherman said, "Then what, señor?" The businessman laughed and said, "That's the best part. When the time is right, you can take your company public and make millions!" "Millions, señor?" said the fisherman. "Then what?"

The businessman said slowly, “Then you can retire. And you can move to a fishing village, where you can sleep late, fish a little, play with your children, take a siesta with your wife, then stroll into the village each evening to sip wine and play guitar with your amigos.”

— as told by Heinrich Böll [revised]

So Mary stayed at Jesus’s feet, while Martha busied herself from one end of the house to the other. Jesus commended Mary, but he challenged Martha: “Martha, Martha, you’re concerned and troubled about many things, when you only need one thing” (vv. 41-42).

The 1991 movie *City Slickers* finds three city guys playing cowboy for a few days on a cattle drive. In one scene, Curly, a coarse, crusty, but genuine cowboy, has a conversation with city slicker Mitch. The conversation goes like this:

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is?

Holds up one finger

This.

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and the rest don’t [matter].

Mitch: But what is the “one thing”?

Curly: *Smiles*

That’s what you have to find out.

Jesus said, “You only need one thing.” What is it? What is that “one thing”? What’s the “one thing” for you? What’s the “one thing” for me? What’s the “one thing” for the church? Maybe it’s a different thing for each one of us, different but related. Maybe, like Curly said, we have to find out what that “one thing” is. But how would we find out? Jesus didn’t tell Martha what that “one thing” was for her, not in so many words. There are clues, though — clues in the gospel to guide us.

Mary, for her part, seems to have found that “one thing.” In each case, Jesus is at the center. She prays to Jesus; she worships Jesus; she listens to Jesus. In each case, Mary is in tune with the moment, whether the moment is one of sorrow or of shadows or of last lessons. And in each moment, Mary focuses on Jesus.

The “one thing” we need may involve spiritual activities, spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and adoration and the study of Scripture — in which case, Mary is a model for us. The “one thing” we need may involve us in acts of mercy and justice, perhaps coming alongside and helping a helpless person — in which case, last Sunday’s Samaritan is a model.

I think the “one thing” will necessarily be about Jesus. I also think that “one thing” will take different forms: following Jesus when he leads, listening to Jesus when he speaks, welcoming Jesus when he sends the Spirit, answering Jesus when he calls, worshiping Jesus when he sits at the Father’s right hand, seeing Jesus when he walks by or falls or laughs or cries.

Mary knew that time was running out, so she stayed at Jesus’s feet. Martha may have known, too, that time was running out. But there was so much she had to do first! We don’t think too much about running out of time. We don’t expect the end of the world soon — even Al Gore hasn’t convinced us of that. And we like to think that there’s plenty of sand left in our own hourglass. Besides, there’s so much we need to do, so much that keeps us busy.

But, really, there’s only “one thing” we need. That’s all. One. And it’s all about Jesus. Isn’t it past time we figured that out?