
9TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

JULY 21, 2013

THE ONE THING NEEDFUL

Pastor Jim Dunn

Luke 10:38-42

Martha and Mary

38 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. **39** And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. **40** 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." **41** But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, **42** but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

This story supposedly comes from the sinking of the Titanic. I don't know if it's true. Even if it's not, it makes a good story. The Titanic had hit the iceberg. Passengers were instructed to go to their lifeboats. But one of the wealthiest passengers hesitated. She headed back to her stateroom. She raced across the slanted deck, ran through the gambling room, arrived at her stateroom, and reached for her valuables. Now, she did not grab her jewelry or gems, although they were incredibly, certainly, valuable. Ignoring the jewelry, she reached to the shelf above the bed and grabbed three small pictures. But instead of racing to the lifeboats with her pictures firmly in hand, she chose to remain in her stateroom. She sat down on the bed, and looked at the pictures of herself and her family, remembering who she was.

Her choice was rather dramatic.

But it is no more so than Martha and Mary's. Martha and Mary could either receive what Jesus wanted to give them through His teaching, the one thing necessary, the one thing needful, the one thing that could get them through the tragedy that was waiting for them like a hidden iceberg. Or, Martha and Mary could focus on serving Jesus.

It doesn't sound like a choice one should have to make. One thing needful sounds pretty important. Yet, serving Jesus is also a priority. It's Immanuel's theme this year: "to serve, not to be served." And in this ministry we must certainly think about not just what we want or what would serve our needs. We have to consider what will serve the needs of the people to whom we are reaching out. We must serve the Lord by serving others.

But there are not two things needful. In setting our priorities, there's still only one thing at the top of the list, one thing needful. Like Martha and Mary, we have to choose. Is service to be our priority? In our everyday, weekday endeavors, is service to be our focus? If service to the Lord and others is the only thing that happens in our workday, is that okay?

Now, to be fair to Martha, the day of Jesus' visit wasn't just a regular workday. It may actually have been the Jewish Feast of Succoth, the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. That's the feast, you may recall, when every Jewish household builds a big lean-to in the backyard. Out of tree branches. Called a *sukkah*. To recall how Israel lived in booths during the 40 years of wandering in the desert. They built a *sukkah* not merely to help them remember who they were, like the woman in my Titanic story, but to help them remember who God is, the One who brought them through the desert and into the Promised Land.

If this was the Feast of Tabernacles that Martha and Mary and Jesus were celebrating, it might explain the absence of their brother Lazarus and of the 12 disciples. They may have gone the 7 miles to Jerusalem to participate in the Feast activities held at the Temple. It might also explain Martha's welcome of Jesus when she was obviously very busy. She may have been busy preparing for the feast.

But the Feast of Tabernacles has always been a time to entertain guests. Thus, as Luke says here in verse 38, "Martha welcomed Jesus into her house." Then, she got right back to work, serving the Lord on this festive occasion instead of receiving the one thing needful. Was that okay?

Not six months after this, Martha's house would not be festive. Their brother Lazarus would be on his deathbed. Martha and Mary would need for their brother to be healed, and then they would need comfort and peace. They would need to know that God is real. Not just in the past but in the present. Not just on the holy days of the year but on the ordinary days and in the disappointing moments, too. They would need the one thing needful.

But when they were rudely reminded that life is as fragile and temporary as a sukkah, when their life together as a family crashed into that unforeseen iceberg, then what would Martha and Mary choose? Would Martha turn to the one thing needful? Would she turn to the lifeboat? Would she turn to God if He weren't real to her? Or, more likely, when her brother lay dying would she turn to herself, try to remember who she was, try to remember that hers was a strong people, and seek comfort in serving, and burn herself out.

The thing is God's not going to be real to us in the disappointing times if we've not made Him our constant companion in our ordinary times. But we get so busy serving, doing, running on fumes, that we don't take the time to receive from God what would help us when we get to the disappointing times. As someone has said, "If Satan can't make you bad, he'll make you busy... Sometimes we are so shocked when a strong Christian confesses that he or she is struggling with their belief and awareness of God's loving care. We might think: You of all people! You are such a wonderful servant of God. How can you doubt for a moment that God loves you?" But that happens more than we care to admit as we get so busy with serving that our sitting at Jesus' feet on most days looks more like standing on one foot while checking our watch.

It wasn't by accident that Mary found herself actually sitting at Jesus' feet that day. Jesus didn't end up at their house by happenstance. Nor did He come to their house merely to celebrate the Feast with them. Just as Jesus could see the cross that awaited Him, He could see the iceberg that awaited their family. Would He not prepare them for that blow? Isn't that why He came to their house and why He comes to this house and why He comes to your house? To prepare us for the icebergs that lie ahead?

Though for a moment Martha didn't think so, Jesus does care. He cared about the shadow that would soon fall upon their home. And He cares about the shadows that fall upon ours. He cares about whether we turn to the Lord when tragedy happens. Jesus cares about whether God remains real to us during our disappointing times. Eventually they would discover how much He cared when they watched their brother come out of his tomb. Later, we all saw how much He cares about bringing these frail and temporary bodies to a better Promised Land when He died and came forth from His own empty tomb. But right at that moment in their house Jesus cared so much about Mary and Martha choosing the one thing needful that He had Mary sitting at His feet, and when Martha complained to Him about it, He rebuked her softly. "Martha, Martha you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary and Mary has chosen it." He cares enough to repeat these words to us.

His Words work miracles. We're not told how Martha responded to this rebuke, but we know what she said at the time of Lazarus' sickness and death. What Jesus did and said that day worked a miracle in Martha's life. She received the one thing needful. She sent for Jesus when Lazarus was very ill, believing Jesus could heal him. When Lazarus died, Martha spoke words of faith that could only have come from sitting at Jesus' feet: "If you had been here my brother would not have died, but even now I know that whatever You ask, God will give you... I know that Lazarus will rise again in the resurrection on the Last Day... I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God..." His Words helped her remember not who she was but who He is.

Amen