

WHAT'S YOUR JESUS COUNT?

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But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:41-42)

One of the fun things I do in my spare time is teach homiletics over at General Seminary. When the students preach their sermons I try to be encouraging and constructive with my feedback. And I try to remember that thirty years ago I was in their exact same position. I'll never forget the preaching class I took my senior year. One afternoon a friend of mine was first up to deliver a sermon. The rest of us dispersed ourselves around the remarkable Chapel of the Good Shepherd, and my friend climbed into the imposing pulpit to give us the word. All seemed to go well, and when the preacher was finished he descended from the pulpit to receive comments and critiques on his work.

The other students and I, knowing that we ourselves would soon be subjected to the same experience, were kind and congratulatory with our feedback. We praised the preacher for his eloquent, yet affable delivery. We complimented him on his interesting references to recent archeological digs in the Holy Land. We thanked him for his informative speculations about what life was really like for the Israelites in the days of the judges. We enthused over his frequent use of scholarly quotes, some of which included phrases in German – because honestly: who ever heard of a good sermon without scholarly quotes? This was the *stuff* of the gospel! The preacher seemed to sit straighter and straighter in his pew as he received the lauds of a mutual affirmation society.

Finally it was saintly old Professor Bennett's turn to comment. He got right to the point: "Do you realize," he said to the student, "that not one single time in your entire sermon did you mention Jesus Christ?" Then an undercover evangelical student decided that the moment had arrived to reveal her true theological colors: "You're right, Professor Bennett," she declared. "His Jesus count was zero!" The student preacher froze, then he furrowed his brow, then his shoulders slumped, then he rustled through his manuscript hoping to find those five little letters, J E S U S, somewhere in his text. They were nowhere to be found. He looked up with only this to say in his defense: "Oops. I forgot." The preacher forgot the one thing that he needed.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, we've heard about someone else who forgot the one thing she needed. Throughout the three years of his public ministry, Jesus often visited the home of Mary and Martha in the town of Bethany. These two sisters and their brother Lazarus provided frequent hospitality for Jesus, which in itself was no small task, since whenever Jesus showed up you could be sure that twelve of his closest friends weren't far behind. The visit to Bethany we've heard about today was probably no exception.

Readers of the Gospels have long noted the striking difference between the personalities of Martha and Mary. The Gospels consistently show Martha to be the responsible sister, the one in control, the one with a keen eye for detail. For two-thousand years we have remembered Martha with words like dependable and dutiful. Mary, her sister, was just the opposite. Mary was much more of a free-spirited type who was probably never ready on time, and didn't appreciate the value of a hard-earned denari. John reports that it was Mary – not a prostitute – who poured the costly ointment over Jesus' head during one of his visits. When their brother Lazarus fell ill and died, Mary was wild with grief and emotion, allowing herself to feel the full impact of the loss. But

Martha, true to form, was seeing to all the details, and even preaching something of a theologically correct yet emotionally stale sermon.

Today we find Martha and Mary very much in character. When Jesus and his entourage arrived, Martha flew into action whipping up dinner for sixteen. Meanwhile, Mary was far more interested in listening to Jesus and being present for him, than she was in helping to prepare the meal. Martha, as you might imagine, wasn't amused by her sister's sense of priorities. People have long sympathized with Martha as the event overwhelmed her. We might expect Jesus to sympathize with Martha too when she complained that Mary wasn't coming to her rescue. Indeed, I've often heard people say they'd like to hear a sermon in defense of Martha. But Jesus did not defend Martha. In fact, he criticized Martha for being distracted, worried, troubled, irritable, and focusing her energies in the wrong place. *"You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

What do you make of Jesus' critique of Martha? Seriously, what would get done without Martha? Isn't the whole point of the church to be the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Jesus on earth? I remember an incident in the parish I served before coming to Grace Church. We were a close-in suburban church near Cincinnati, and in the same diocese was a struggling, inner city parish with an old, historic building. We were blessed with an abundance of members and resources; they were a few dozen souls struggling to keep the lights on and reach out to a rough neighborhood.

At one point, for reasons I can't remember, I had occasion to be at the inner city church, and I noticed that the back end of the building was in desperate need of a paint job. What was to stop us from organizing a work crew to scrape and putty and paint their church? Well, my conclusion was that nothing should stand in our way! So I contacted their leadership and we came up with a plan that might lead to a long term companion relationship between our two churches. It would be one small step for Christians, but one giant leap for Christianity. For our part we mobilized the contractors and painters and people among us who were unafraid to climb ladders, and we purchased all the materials. Because the folks from the inner city church were older, their contribution to the effort would be the picnic lunch.

When the work day arrived our volunteers began coming and going as individual schedules permitted. A pattern emerged that each would put in a few hard-charging hours of scraping and prep work before being on their way to fulfill other weekend commitments. At lunch time we called together those who were there at the time and blessed the food. Most of the workers, however, were there to get the job done, not eat. They wanted to squeeze every bit of progress out of every hour, and daylight was burning. After a quick bite they were back to work. The day was a success by worldly standards in that we did indeed get the job done. We did good work. By the standards of God's kingdom, however, I would say that the day was far less successful than what it should have been. It seemed that we scarcely paid attention to the inner city folks, and their copious offering of food went largely uneaten. In retrospect, these folks were looking to make a connection with fellow Christians, with Jesus. You know the Scripture verse: *For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.* We, on the other hand, rushing to and fro in a frenzy of good-deed doing missed the point. We missed the one thing we all needed.

What is the one thing? What is the better part? It is being still in the presence of Jesus, and available to him in heart and mind. Martha's well-intentioned serving made her unavailable to Jesus. It's not that Martha's service was wrong. The problem was that Martha seemed more concerned about the preparation of the food and the protocol of the event than she was with Jesus himself. Think about it: Jesus himself – the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell – was under her roof, but was the Lord of life her focus? No, her many distracting tasks were her

focus. Martha was spiritually unavailable to Jesus. How available to Jesus are you? How available am I? Here I'm not talking about being available to Jesus by serving on a half dozen charitable boards, working in a soup kitchen, and in your spare time generally trying to save the world. How easy it is to be distracted like Martha with our many tasks, to live by works and not by grace, to take the message of Jesus and turn it into another law that we must, should, and ought to obey. How easy it was for us to miss the point in trying to serve and save the inner city church. Whatever sermon we were trying to preach, we forgot the presence and possibility of Jesus in our midst. Our Jesus count was zero.

Perhaps the antidote to our frenzy is real Sabbath time. Note well: real Sabbath time is not what we think of as vacation. Real Sabbath time is sitting intentionally with Jesus. It is being still in heart and mind and body and pausing, if only for a moment, to remember Jesus. It is listening and not speaking. What a counter-cultural message in every day and age. *One thing is needful* says Jesus, and the one thing we need is to be in the presence of the Lord. *Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.* By contrast, consider all the things that will be taken away from us. Time and gravity eventually will peel away all new paint, and all the great good deeds we do. Our careers, our homes, our bodies all fall away. But your relationship with God through Jesus will never be taken away. On that note, I think it is high time in this sermon to give you a scholarly quote from a German theologian, because honestly: who ever heard of a good sermon without scholarly quotes? Paul Tillich, one of the most influential and controversial theologians of the 20th century, wrote: "*Martha is concerned about many things, but all of them are finite, preliminary, transitory. Mary is concerned about one thing, which is infinite, ultimate, lasting.*"

Unless you have imposed a total news blackout on yourself, then you know that this weekend the nation is celebrating the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11. It was on Sunday, July 20, 1969 when the Lunar Module, Eagle, landed on the surface of the moon. The two astronauts inside the Eagle – Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin – would be the first humans ever to touch down and then walk on another celestial body. The mission was an enormously complex achievement, especially given the state of technology half a century ago. Indeed, the smart phone in your pocket has approximately one-million times more memory than Apollo 11's guidance computer. Neither Siri nor Alexa were available to help the astronauts accomplish a lengthy post-landing checklist. It would be many hours before they could be ready to step out of the craft and walk on the moon.

At one point during all the preparations, Aldrin radioed Mission Control and requested that everyone listening pause and "give thanks in his or her own way." Then, from the few personal items he was allowed to bring along, he produced a traveling Communion kit provided by his church, complete with a small chalice, a wafer of bread, and a vial of wine. He poured out the wine and read a verse from the Gospel of John (15:5): Jesus said: "*I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in Him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.*" Then Aldrin ate the bread and drank the wine. Apparently, Armstrong chose not to participate, but looked on respectfully.

At first NASA wanted to keep the lunar Communion service under wraps, but today the story has been told many times. What interests me is how Buzz Aldrin chose the better part even when he had ample cause for worry. Would they be able to blast off from the moon at all? The ascent technology hadn't been tested. He had ample cause for distraction, including the sheer excitement of what they were doing. But amidst it all he knew in advance that he would need one thing: Jesus.

Jesus said, "*You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.*" The one thing you need is a relationship with God through Jesus. It goes on forever. It will not be taken away from you.