



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 6 – Proper 11 (C)

Only One Thing

[RCL] Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Are you busy? Do you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by all the tasks you have to do much, if not most of the time? When people ask you how things are going, do you often say, “Busy?” We live in a very busy, hectic society. In fact, it is popular, in some sense, to be busy. Maybe we’re even afraid of not being busy because then when people ask us what we’ve been up to, we might say, “Not too much, I’m just taking it slow,” and then people might think we need to get a life. In fact, “busyness” can even make us feel important. And unfortunately, even our children are often too busy. Many of us can’t keep up with the demanding schedules of our kids and teenagers, from their academics to their extracurriculars, sports, clubs, music lessons, etc.

By way of example, not long ago, one church had a large youth group of about 30 high school youth. The youth director wanted to build up a middle school youth ministry, and so held a meeting with the parents in order to discuss the possibility of starting a weeknight youth group. The youth group leader was surprised to learn that the only parents who attended the meeting were there for the sole purpose of asking the youth director not to create this for their middle schoolers. They did so because they “could not possibly add one more thing” to their weekly schedule, because their children were “already so busy with activities,” that they felt it was “not possible to drive them to one more thing” and worried about feeling “pressure” to add another activity to their week. Needless to say, midweek youth group for the middle schoolers never started at that parish. It may lead us to wonder what has happened in our society when parents and children are too busy, not just for church, but for even *one* more weekly activity. How can this be healthy for any of us?

Our lesson from the Gospel of Luke today has something to say to us about our busyness. In fact, it seems like a text written specifically for our time and culture. In the story, we have the quintessential busy person: Martha, who the text says, has “many tasks.” She is very much like most of us. In fact, she has so many tasks, she is described as being “distracted by them.” How many of us can relate to being so busy that we’re distracted? Add to this the fact that we are busy, but then we often spend our downtime on social media. Truly, the level of distraction we may be managing is likely incalculable. Perhaps we are so busy and distracted that the only thing we notice is that we’re not getting the help or support we need. That was certainly true of Martha. In fact, Martha’s busyness and distraction caused her not only to notice the lack of

help she was getting but also led to her becoming rather irritated with her sister for not joining in on being so busy. We too can become frustrated when others don't choose to participate in our hurried ways.

Mary, on the other hand, is not busy or distracted. She is doing only one thing with her time according to the text. She is simply sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him.

Martha notices this and urges Jesus to get her sister Mary to get up and help her out with her work saying, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Jesus' response is quite unexpected. One may have thought in that culture that Jesus would have told Mary to go and do the traditional work of a woman in that culture: to get busy waiting on the guests, not to sit and learn at the feet of the rabbi. In fact, we know that in Jesus' time, formal education and higher learning were generally inaccessible to women in both Jewish and Roman society, yet Mary took the initiative to learn from Jesus, ignoring the role she had been placed into as a woman by her culture, and ignoring the societal demand to keep busy. We read that Jesus not only supported Mary and her desire to learn, but even gently chastised Martha for her demands, saying, "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."

Jesus sounds a little like a Zen Buddhist teacher with that phrase, "There is need of only one thing." The practice of being present to the here and now, of having a mindfulness that is not distracted or busied or hurried, but focused on only one thing is a teaching we find throughout Eastern religions and in all forms of meditation, including in the practices of Christian contemplation and Centering Prayer. Because it is so effective, this practice has made its way into current psychology and therapeutic practice. But Jesus was teaching this way of being 2,000 years ago. And truly, we need to re-learn how to stop our busyness and distraction and to be present like Mary, as Jesus advises. Because indeed, *there is need of only one thing*.

Mary chose to sit still at the feet of her teacher, Jesus. And we too are called to stop, to put aside our many tasks and all that distracts us, and to sit at Jesus' feet. As Christians, we are called to do this every day, and if we can't manage that, we can start by doing it periodically and work our way up. We can pray to God, read the Scriptures and holy or devotional books regularly, and be present to God and God's presence in Christ to us, and listen for the still small voice of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It is there and God is always reaching out to us in love.

During St. Joan of Arc's trial, she was questioned as to whether the voice of God she claimed to hear wasn't merely a voice in her head. She responded by saying essentially, "How else do you think God speaks to us?" Indeed, we are called to expect to hear God's voice as we pray and read Scripture, attend church, and listen to the wise friends and counselors in our lives. All followers of Jesus are called to observe a Sabbath day, a day of rest, every week – and to stop and sit at Jesus' feet. Sabbath goes beyond the necessity of vacation periods and is an invitation into regular times of spiritual retreat. We can also pursue other options of stopping to listen: seeing a spiritual director, keeping a journal, reading daily, worshipping

weekly, and creating time for family and private devotion to God. Every home can set aside one place for prayer, and we can all create a prayer corner or altar in our homes. Our kitchen or dining room tables can also become places to read Scripture, share, and pray.

Martha may look like many of us, but Mary is our example today. Jesus' invitation is so relevant today and his words invite us into a place of greater health mentally, physically, and spiritually. May his words soak into your soul so that you and your families can heed his call to stop, slow down, be present, and sit at his feet, because "there is need of only one thing." Thanks be to God.

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