

One Thing vs. Many Things

Our text from Luke this morning is one of the shorter passages that is lifted up by the Lectionary for our consideration having only five verses. To me, it has been one of the most misused text throughout church history...often being used to set up a conflict between what are pictured as two forms of discipleship—the one of service and the one of contemplation. This set up has led to many Bible Studies with this them of conflict as the basis. I participated in one based on the book by Joanna Weaver titled Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World. I have seen and read commentaries urging the concept of being like Mary, not Martha...but having served within the Women of the Church to provide fellowship meal, to tend the children in the nursery; to prepare the elements for Communion...and so on; I don't think that the Christian community can do without those who serve...and I don't think that was what Jesus was saying in this situation...unlike one commentator who began by picturing Jesus as beginning a “cat-fight” between the two sisters. Those who want to present the text in this manner seem to have forgotten or chosen to ignore the context into which this narrative is placed: Jesus has just told the one who questioned him about what to do to obtain eternal life the Parable of the Good Samaritan and then instructed that he should go and do likewise. The narrative about the seventy Jesus sent out and their return was placed just before this. Instructions to the seventy highlighted the tradition of hospitality present in their culture which as guest they would be offered; Jesus instructions included how they were to receive the hospitality...graciously, accepting whatever was offered. Expanding our consideration to include Jesus' view and teachings on behavior for disciples, how do we move past the many interpretations which ignore those things? One of the keys to this issue is found in Jesus' use of two phrases: “many things” and “one thing”. Most of us know the story well. Martha is distracted by her many tasks. She is, after all, hosting a dinner in her home; a dinner for a special guest. We know that means preparing food, tending to guests, making sure drinks are offered and refilled and perhaps tidying up quickly when no one is watching. Her sister, Mary, does not participate in any of these things. Instead she takes a seat at Jesus' feet—the position of a disciple who is listening to his teachings and seeking to soak in the wisdom being offered by this special guest. It is Martha's complaint to Jesus about this situation which leads to Jesus' comments which seem to rebuke Martha and commend Mary. The moral resounding throughout church history from this has been “Focus on Jesus, ignore the rest.” In many ways just looking at these five verses it seems simple, clear-cut and obvious that that is

the “moral of the story, so to speak.” Yet this is an impossible set up, creating dichotomy between Mary and Martha which seems to be not only a false one, but an unachievable one, and frankly, a judgmental one. We probably can agree that, yes, we should set aside our many tasks and distractions to focus on Jesus and his teachings, but thinking about the two previous teachings...do we really think it that simple? Last week when reading from the Hebrew Scriptures we considered the vision the prophet Amos had about a plumb line used to measure how well Israel was following God’s instructions about how to live together as God’s people. God tells Amos their behavior which tramples on the needy and poor of the land is not acceptable; today’s vision of that fruit basket indicates God’s great displeasure and what the consequences of that behavior will bring. It seems that God’s people have been distracted by the lure of wealth and the earthly perks that go along with it. Perhaps their behavior shows they have lost focus and failed to follow the one needful thing—God’s commandments—and their distraction will be costly for them. And if we read today’s text from Luke carefully we see that this being distracted is at the core of how Jesus responds to Martha. Jesus does not make any suggestions about Martha’s providing hospitality to him and the others until she tries to get Jesus to criticize Mary’s choice of sitting at his feet to hear him teach. Our first verse in this text sets a scene when Jesus enters a certain village, he follows the pattern he set for his disciples: he enters the home of a woman named Martha who welcomes him. As the home’s owner, the customs of hospitality require the homeowner to provide hospitality for the guests. Martha provides welcome and sets about the “many tasks” it takes to provide the hospitality. Her sister, Mary is there, but custom does not require her to provide for those not her guests...so she goes and sits at the feet of this honored guest to listen to what is being said. There are two interesting Greek verbs in this text: the first in verse 39 is παρακαθεσθῆσα (parakathezomai) which is a word not found elsewhere in the New Testament. The prefix attached to the verb meaning sit down is para which has the literal meaning alongside of, beside or near. The second occurs in verse 40 and while translated as distracted can also mean “over-burdened” or drawn away from. Martha becomes “overburdened” and seeks to get Jesus to have Mary aid her by asking the Jesus “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” Jesus’ response begins by a repeating her name, twice...indicating he does care for her, but Jesus goes on to diagnosis her problem as being “worried and distracted by many things.” The problem lies not with Mary but with Martha because she has allowed the situation to distract her from

what is important. It isn't so much that the tasks themselves are so great, but her worry about those tasks has made her anxious and worried. She may be near to Jesus who is her guest, but she has made the tasks of providing the hospitality more important than she should have. Mary has made Jesus and what he is teaching her sole focus. The problem was not that Martha served—no word of reproach would have come her way for that, but she chose to rebuke her sister for not lending a hand. The preceding texts have shown us that offering hospitality and service to others is also a needful thing in Jesus' eyes. Here Jesus says or does nothing to change the idea that hospitality and service are noble endeavors and the right thing for disciples to do. But Martha in her efforts to provide hospitality has forgotten the importance of what the guest offers her. Her anger at Mary is a part of her humanity, and the human tendency to have a blind spot burst out in raw emotion. Martha's blind spot is actually a symptom of "distracted discipleship"...she has missed the point of obedience. She seems to be suffering from a little vainglory because she has become focused on what she is doing rather than why she was doing it. Vainglory is the term for what happens when we value the doing of good Christian duties, our service to others, as the measure of ourselves and our faith. When we become proud of all of our Christian doing, and use our service to compare and deem ourselves better than others we have been distracted and drawn away from Christ. Vainglory can lead, like it is shown by Martha in this narrative, to being so distracted by the things we are doing, that the doing's all we can see. She has allowed the "many tasks" to pull her away from her discipleship of listening to Jesus as she performs her task of providing hospitality. Seeking to impress with her actions, she loses sight of what is being taught. She begins focusing on her sister's action rather than inward to see what has happened within. Martha has forgotten that she is loved and valued not because of what she does, but because of who she is: a beloved child of God. There is nothing wrong with what Martha was doing—as the previous story Jesus told about the Good Samaritan ended with Jesus telling the lawyer to "go and do likewise." But in the midst of all our doing we, also, can get distracted, lured into thinking that we ultimately will only find our true value and purpose in and through what we do, rather than who we are, God's beloved children. Jesus' response to Martha, although frequently categorized as a rebuke, may have really been more of a reminder of why she offered hospitality, of why she was valued, and an invitation to come and hear Jesus' refreshing words of God's mercy, grace and love. When you read this text consider that Jesus may or may not be elevating contemplation over service—as disciples we need to

practice both and generally should not have to choose between one or the other. As Fred Craddock says in his "Interpretation" series commentary on the passage, if we asked Jesus which example we are to follow, the active Good Samaritan or the contemplative Mary, Jesus would probably say "Yes." Both are needful, but the one thing is to remain undistracted and instead focus on following Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.