

## ONE THING NEEDFUL

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 2, 2019  
based on Matthew 6:7–13; Luke 10:38–42***

In the first Scripture reading this morning, we heard Jesus' instruction in the Sermon on the Mount about praying a particular prayer that we now called the Lord's Prayer. Last Sunday, we noted that there are two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the gospels—the one that we heard this morning, and another in the gospel of Luke, which is an abbreviated rendition of the one in the Sermon on the Mount. We also noted last Sunday how the Lord's Prayer originated. It was what Jesus taught the disciples after they had observed him praying, and they said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." [*He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray" Luke 11:1*]

Today is the second sermon in a summer long series entitled, "Teach Us to Pray—the spiritual journey of the Lord's Prayer." During this series, we will be exploring the Lord's Prayer in depth, and we will see how this prayer is not so much a standardized prayer as it is a model or pattern for prayer, which tells us a great deal about what our relationship with God can be. But before looking at the specifics of the Lord's Prayer, it is valuable to look at what Jesus shows us about prayer through his own actions.

Last week we noted how Jesus models for us a spiritual balance in life—he confronted a host of demands and pressures and engaged in a whirlwind of activity, and yet in the midst of it all he would retreat at times to deserted places to pray, thus demonstrating that all our activity needs to be steadily undergirded by Sabbath times—time for prayer and worship—which nurture our connection with God. This morning we are looking further at this theme, as we consider a story in which Jesus taught the importance of spiritual balance to others, in a home in the town of Bethany.

Luke chapter 10, in the second reading we heard this morning, tells of how Jesus was welcomed into the home of two sisters—Mary and Martha. [*A woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary [Luke 10:38–39]* Martha appears in the story as the consummate hostess. She scurries around, making everything nice for Jesus and preparing food, which would have been the principle activity of anyone being a hostess in the first century. It is much as we would hustle about doing all sorts of things today when we are receiving guests into our home. Meanwhile, her sister Mary simply sits on the floor and listens to Jesus. [*Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. Luke 10:39*] What does a sister like Martha do when she is undertaking all the work and her sister is sitting there doing nothing? She complains, of course. The gospel story continues, "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." [Luke 10:40]

We may sympathize with Martha. Yet Jesus answers her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is one thing needful. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:41–42)

Jesus' response may be jarring for us. When work needs to be done, we think that everybody ought to be pitching in, and thus Martha would seem to be right in complaining about Mary, who is just sitting there. Last week we noted how our culture places prime value

on accomplishing things. We esteem productivity and action. We tend to measure people's value in terms of what they produce. Martha—who engages in a flurry of activity in order to be a good hostess—is much more our cultural image of virtue than Mary, who does nothing it seems. Yet Jesus praises Mary and chastises Martha.

What Jesus perceives is that Martha's busyness, while well intentioned, has taken her away from the most important thing of all. The Son of God is present in her house, and she off stirring soup. It is Mary, Jesus says, who has chosen the "better part"—she is sharing in fellowship with Christ, listening to the word of the Lord.

This story is particularly appropriate for us, because many of us are so very much like Martha. We tend to get wrapped up in well intentioned busyness. At times, like Martha, we may feel overwhelmed by all the demands of everything that must be done. It is not always the activities themselves that are the problem. Certainly if we are responsible to our family and to our job and to the needs of our household, and if we live out our Christian commitment, we are going to be involved in all sorts of activity; indeed Methodists historically have believed that a faithful Christian will be a very active one. If you look at the activity in our church, you might say that we especially value the activity in which Martha was engaged, as we have a very active church kitchen! In fact, we are always in need of more volunteers—there is a sign-up sheet on the kitchen refrigerator. We rightfully praise all those people who, like Martha, have the dedication to plunge into important work that needs to be done—whether it is meal preparation in the church kitchen, or teaching and caring for children in our Sunday School, as we are recognizing this morning all those who have been serving as Sunday School teachers and caregivers.

In our Scripture story, Martha's problem was not that she was so very active. Her key issue is spelled out in the Scripture as it says: "Martha was distracted by her many tasks." [Luke 10:40] Jesus then said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things." [Luke 10:41] Here we arrive at the great irony of the story—that Martha was so busy trying to show hospitality to Jesus that she neglected to talk with him.

Martha's condition—"worried and distracted by many things"—describes the common condition of twenty-first century Americans. Indeed we may not only find ourselves worried and distracted by all sorts of responsibilities, but our culture supplies us a host of additional distractions—through the internet and advertising and all sorts of entertainments. It is easy to get so absorbed with all the things that would command our attention and that would keep us busy that we lose sight of the "one thing needful"—our relationship with God.

In sharp contrast to the "distracted" life, our story offers us the image of Mary. [*Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. Luke 10:39*] Mary in the story is not simply idle; she is focused on Christ, talking with Christ, listening to Christ, learning from Christ. Jesus lifts her up as an example of how we need above all to be attentive to God, and receptive to how God would work in our lives. Mary in this story has thus become an enduring image for the practice of prayer—how in the midst of the swirl of things that call for our attention, what is most important is that we are focused on God and listening to God, sharing in fellowship with God.

It is that spiritual fellowship which then will inspire, direct, and empower all our actions, so that instead of being continually worried and distracted, we can be equipped by God for effective living. Jesus is the prime example of that. Jesus was extremely active—constantly teaching and healing and going from place to place—yet he was not frenetic and

frazzled in his activity, but rather in the midst of it all we find in Jesus a relaxed nature and a centeredness in God.

It is that centeredness in God which enables our activity finally to make a real difference in the world. Often today people want to imagine that prayer and worship are just passive undertakings, which don't really yield anything concrete. In reality, authentic prayer is revolutionary, because it opens a person to the disruptive power and truth of God. This is quite evident in Jesus, whose pure openness to the Spirit resulted a considerable disruption of the status quo and transformative action—one good example being our story about Mary and Martha.

Mary in this story is pictured as sitting at the feet of Jesus. In the first century context, Mary was thus assuming the role of a disciple, that is, a student or follower of a rabbi—in this case, the ultimate teacher, Jesus. Disciples would sit at the feet of their teacher. But in the first century, it was broadly assumed that only men should be doing this. Only men were the students of rabbis; women were expected to attend to the housework. In the common first century view, Martha was doing what women should do; Mary was out of line, and Jesus should have responded to Martha's complaint by sending Mary into the kitchen. But Jesus affirmed Mary in her role as a disciple. We regularly see Jesus doing this sort of thing. He overturned the biases and traditions of his day; he welcomed women into his circle of close followers, he accepted people who were outcasts, he chose the unlikely and lifted up the lowly. In Jesus we see how the connection with God leads to new vision and finally to the transformation of the world.

In the end, the figures of Mary and Martha represent the twin poles of the spiritually balanced life. We need first of all to be like Mary—sitting at Jesus' feet, listening for the word of the Lord, connecting spiritually with Christ. And it is that connection which enables us then to be like Martha—engaged in positive activity—without being worried or distracted.

One of the very meaningful ways in which we can take time to be in fellowship with Christ is the sacrament of Communion. As we share in Communion this morning, may we let Christ draw us out of worry and distraction into that one thing most needful—a life-giving connection with Christ.