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One Thing is Necessary

Luke 10:38-42

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What does it look like to be a disciple of Jesus? More specifically, what are the *priorities* of a disciple of Jesus? Where do we put our focus? Where do we spend our time? On what things do we expend our energy? And why? As Christians we can focus our energy and our efforts on a lot of things that are good, but we may not be focusing on them for the right reasons. We say or even think that we're doing things for Jesus, but in the end our reasons may be mostly or entirely selfish. We may even put on a good show and the people around us may really look up to us for the things we're doing for the kingdom, but we may be doing them for ourselves.

When I was in University I was very involved in my church and its campus student group. In fact, during my first year there was only one night each week that I wasn't involved in some activity either at the church or with its student ministry. In contrast, my neighbours in the dorm were out partying. I felt pretty good about myself. I could compare myself to them and feel good that I was serving God while they were out getting drunk and having promiscuous sex. The people at church were impressed with my devotion. My parents were impressed with my devotion. And I was happy that they were impressed. I was even hoping God was impressed with my devotion, but even more than that, I was hoping that some of the cute girls at church would be impressed with my

devotion. I was doing all the right things, and I really did want to serve God, but in the end my strongest motives weren't all that different from my neighbours in the dorm. They went out drinking and partying because they feared being lonely and because they were interested in girls. I was doing all those "good" things for pretty much the same reasons. I was making a good show of being a disciple—and it wasn't *all* show—but my motives and my loyalties were mixed and that's not the sort of whole-hearted discipleship that Jesus calls us to.

This morning we'll be looking at Luke 10:38-42. It's another familiar story, this time about Mary and Martha. The usual approach that I've seen to this story is for the teacher or preacher to ask us which "type" of person each of us is: Are you a 'Martha' or are you a 'Mary'? Are you the sort of person who always has to be doing something and is always worrying about everything being just right, or are you the sort of quiet person who just sits and listens to the wisdom of Jesus? The implication is that some of us are "doers", like Martha, and that some of us are "be-ers", like Mary, and that if you're a "do-er" you need to be more of a "be-er". Brothers and sisters, let me suggest that this misses the point of the story. Luke only gives us a snapshot of this one incident. There's nothing here to tell us that Mary and Martha were totally different personality types. Being sisters they very well might have been. But Mary could very well have been a "do-er", just like Martha. The point isn't their personality types. The point lies in their response to Jesus and his call to be disciples. Think on that as we read the story.

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a

sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. (Luke 10:38-40a)

We know from other texts that Martha and Mary lived in Bethany, which is just outside of Jerusalem. In fact, it's on the road to Jericho that Jesus described in his parable of the Good Samaritan. The last we saw Jesus, he was still a long way from Jerusalem, so we can gather that this episode in Jesus' ministry took place quite a bit later, but that Luke puts it here because it fits so well with Jesus' teaching on discipleship. More specifically, Jesus has been talking a lot about what it means to welcome him and about the consequences of rejecting him. Into the middle of that we now have this little story about hospitality—about two women who literally welcomed Jesus into their home, but each of them welcomed him in her own way. Consider that. Martha and Mary both welcomed Jesus, but only one of those two welcomes was what Jesus was looking for. Only one of those two welcomes teaches us what it means to be a disciple.

It was Martha's house and Luke says that she "welcomed" Jesus. The Greek word he uses is a technical word for hospitality. She brings Jesus into her home, she welcomes him, she serves him, and she entertains him. That's a "welcome" by most people's standards. Think about what you'd do if Jesus were coming to town. Imagine if you offered to put Jesus up for the night and he sent word back that he'd be happy to stay with you. I get tired just thinking about all the preparations: vacuuming, dusting, tidying up, and then I start thinking about all the other things that I could do and wondering if I've got time to do them before Jesus arrives. He's

the Son of God, after all. I should probably mow the lawn, clean the cobwebs off the chairs on the front porch, power-wash the driveway—maybe even repaint the trim and touch-up the dings in the walls inside. And I’m just thinking as the “man of the house”. What about the cooking? Whatever my wife prepares, it had better be made from the best, and it had better be made to perfection. Again: Jesus is coming!

It might just be me, but I think that most of us would respond something like that if Jesus said he was coming to spend the night in our home. Some people might not do quite as much and other people might do more, but for most of us, our first thought is to pull out all the stops, whatever that might mean. This is how Martha was thinking. But then Luke tells us about her sister, Mary. While we’re thinking of all the work we have to do to make things perfect for Jesus, Luke tells us that when Jesus came Mary sat at his feet and listened to his teaching.

How we respond to Mary is something of a test. I’ve got to admit that I get a little tired just thinking of all the things I’d need to do—or think I’d need to do—if Jesus were coming to my house. And then Luke gives us this picture of Mary quietly sitting at Jesus’ feet and I realise that I’ve got it all wrong. Here’s the Lord of Glory coming to my house, the Word of God Incarnate, and while he sits there sipping my best wine and eating my perfect appetisers, I’m rushing around doing everything but letting him teach me what it means to be a disciple. The man whose mission is to restore me to God, the man who was so devoted to that mission that he gave his own life for me, the man who more than anything else *wants* me to know him is in my house and I’m so busy trying to make sure

everything is perfect for him that I’m ignoring the reason he came in the first place. He wants to know me and wants me to know him. He doesn’t care how clean the floor is, how fresh the sheets are, how expensive the wine is, or whether or not the roast is a little dry and overdone. He wants to know me and for me to know him. You see, that’s what Mary understood. Preachers and commentators have for years drawn this distinction between Mary and Martha. Mary was a “be-er” and Martha was a “do-er”. Friends, Luke doesn’t say that. Mary may have been just as much a “do-er” as her sister. The real difference is that Mary understood what it meant to be Jesus’ disciple and Martha, well, not so much—she was running around the kitchen making sure no one could fault her preparations, her housekeeping, or her cooking.

Mary is a disciple. That’s how Luke portrays her. That’s what it means to be sitting at Jesus’ feet. In Acts, St. Paul describes himself as having been educated at the feet of the great rabbi Gamaliel. That was the posture of a student. You didn’t apply to a school or college as we do today and then sit in desks as the professor stands at the front and teaches. You applied to be taken in by a rabbi and then as he sat—which was a position of authority for teachers—his students would sit at his feet to listen and to learn. That’s what Mary’s doing here. Mary understands just who it is who’s in her home. She understands the importance of this opportunity and so she takes every advantage of it. While Martha scrambles anxiously to prepare the perfect dinner, Mary understands that Jesus would have been just as happy had they ordered out for pizza. (And if you *really* understand what’s going on here you might say, “Ordering out for pizza’s a great idea! When the delivery guy

comes we can invite him in to sit at Jesus’ feet too!) Jesus wasn’t there for perfection. He accepted Martha’s hospitality, but Martha’s missing that in coming to her house, Jesus is actually the one offering her something and what he has to offer is far greater than any physical hospitality she could ever offer to him. Food and a soft bed with clean sheets are great, but the real welcome Jesus wants is the devotion of a disciple who sees the kingdom drawing near and wants to be a part of it.

There’s something else here that we can’t pass up either. That’s the fact that Mary, a woman, is sitting at Jesus’ feet. Women never sat at the feet of rabbis. When Paul sat at the feet of Gamaliel, there were no women there. This is why Proverbs and the Wisdom of ben Sira address their wisdom over and over to “my son” and not to “my daughter”. Each of those books is a collection of wisdom. In the case of ben Sira it’s a collection of a man who spent his life running a school in which he taught “wisdom” to boys and young men who would have sat at his feet. No girls allowed. And yet Jesus does something radical. We’ve already seen that there were women in his entourage, but here we see him acting as a rabbi and at least one of those women as his student and disciple. We have to be careful not to read too much into this, but we can’t ignore it or read too little into it either. Jesus is crossing boundaries again. His kingdom welcomes both men and women and we’ll see that in the dramatic shift in the sacrament of the New Covenant. Circumcision was the sacramental sign of the Old Covenant. It was for men, whose membership in the covenant covered their wives and daughters. But in the New Covenant everyone is called to the waters of baptism, men and women alike. And if women are

called to sit at Jesus feet to learn the ways of the kingdom that means that in Jesus' Church, women are called to share in kingdom ministry alongside men. As I said, we have to be careful not to make too much of this. Jesus didn't call women as apostles and the Early Church didn't call them as priests or bishops. Jesus and the apostles continue to stress a theology of male headship rooted in the Creation itself, but the picture that Luke gives us here, of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, should serve as a warning against setting up boundaries in the Church that Jesus rejected in his ministry. The call to discipleship and the call to be active in kingdom ministry go out to *all*.

Now, back to Martha. Most of us probably sympathise with Martha. We'd want everything to be perfect, too, if Jesus were coming for dinner. But when we see how Mary responds we snap out of it and realise that she understood things better than Martha. But some of us may still sympathise with Martha. We recognise that Mary wants to do something good, but we still feel sorry for Martha, running herself ragged while her sister sits. There's a time and place for everything, we think, and now's not the time to be sitting at Jesus' feet. Mary could do that *after* dinner! (Although, I expect that even when dinner was over, Martha would have found something else to fuss over.) Martha doesn't think this way. She's annoyed. Look at verses 40-42:

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." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which

will not be taken away from her."
(Luke 10:40b-42)

There are two things we should notice before going any further. The first is the way in which Luke stresses that Jesus is Lord. First he told us that Mary was sitting at the *Lord's* feet and here he tells us that it's the *Lord* who responds to Martha. Second, Martha knows that Jesus is *Lord*. That's how she addresses him here. Everybody has a good sense of who Jesus is. Mary knows that Jesus is Lord and Martha knows it too. But look at the difference in how they respond to his being Lord. Consider the difference in how each of these sisters welcomes Jesus. Mary submitted to him in humility and is sitting at his feet to learn. She knows that the kingdom is coming near and she wants to take in every bit of it that she can. But not only is Martha running around anxious and troubled, but when she can't get Mary to help her, she tries to get Jesus to use his authority to command Mary to help her.

Mary knows that Jesus is Lord and so she has submitted herself to his agenda. She's read to let Jesus teach and direct her. Martha knows that Jesus is Lord too, but rather than submitting to him and to his agenda, she wants Jesus to use his authority to further her own agenda. Again, they both recognise that Jesus is Lord, but in Mary we see what *real* discipleship looks like.

This is a story we need to hear, because you and I are prone to making the same sort of mistake that Martha made. It's pretty obvious that Martha loved and respected Jesus. She wanted to provide the best for him. Her problem was that she was letting worldly priorities, worldly conventions, and worldly thinking drive her agenda. She was

letting worry and anxiety and "busyness" shape what it meant to be a disciple. How often do we do the same sort of thing? Martha thought that to be a good disciple she had to meet the worldly standards of what it means to be the perfect hostess. But in focusing on those worldly standards and in her rush and hurry and worry she was missing what Jesus had come to offer her. How often do we get so bogged down in "things" that we miss the kingdom when it comes near? How often do we even think we're doing the work of the kingdom—consider that Martha thought she was serving Jesus—but because we've got the wrong priorities and values, we actually wind up serving not the kingdom, not the Lord, but ourselves. That's the more subtle danger. We can throw ourselves into things that look good—to us and to others—but all too often we're being driven by our own agenda, not God's. My biggest reason for joining the church choir was a girl. Martha's biggest reason for being the "hostess with the mostess" was so that everyone would think well of her. Whom are we seeking to serve? Whose agenda are we seeking to meet?

But what's even worse than putting our own agenda in place of Jesus' agenda is when we then do what Martha did when Mary wouldn't help her. Rather than submitting to Jesus authority as Lord, she called on him as Lord to use his authority to make Mary submit to her agenda. How often do we pray and ask God to bring So-and-so around to our way of thinking and to work with our vision? So-and-so needs to stop what he's doing and come help me! We never stop to think that maybe So-and-so, like Mary, is the one doing the really important work. And while we're talking about prayer: consider our prayers. How

often, when we're worried and anxious about our lives, do we automatically assume that things aren't going the way God wants simply because our situation in life doesn't match *our* expectations. We let worldly thinking creep in all the time. The world says that everything has to be perfect and happy, pain- and tribulation-free and that if any of these things are present, we need to do everything in our power to change things. We let that sort of worldly thinking influence us. We forget that as disciples Jesus has called us to a very different set of values from the world and that he's even promised that suffering and tribulation are part of our calling. And so, like Martha and knowing that he is sovereign, we call on him in the midst of our troubles and demand that he use his authority to change our situation when what we really need to do is understand that because Jesus is sovereign, he is in control of our situation and then pray for the grace to see us through, to pray that we might learn something and grow as a result of walking more closely with him.

Notice Jesus rebuke to Martha. She's focused on so many things that she's missing what Jesus calls the "one thing necessary". She's missing that the kingdom has come near. She's caught up in the values and priorities of a worldly system that is passing away. It's the very system that Jesus has come to overturn. Mary, on the other hand, sees that the eternal has come near and she's soaking it in. Mary has chosen to prepare for eternity. Brothers and sisters, think on that. Jesus has come near to us. Are we allowing ourselves to be shaped and transformed by his Word? Or are we spending our days in worry and anxiety that we aren't meeting the world's standards and conventions? Worse, are we spending our days

waiting for Jesus to fulfil our own agendas? You see, Mary knew that eternity was at stake. She knew that the king had come to establish his kingdom and she saw that his kingdom was very different from what she knew. Jesus went to the poor, to the sick, to the unclean, to the sinner, and to the outsiders. She wanted to be part of his kingdom, but his values and his priorities were all knew and confusing. She wanted to know how to follow him as he did all these weird and wonderful things, and so she sat at his feet. She became a disciple. She *submitted* to him—to learn from him, to learn his ways, and to follow not her own agenda, but to follow wherever he would lead. Dear friends, we need to do the same. When Jesus returns on that last great day as King, when he brings heaven to earth and establishes his kingdom once and for all, he won't be coming to compliment us on having done such a good job fulfilling our own agendas. He won't come back to compliment us on how well we've kept our homes or how well we've built our own ministries. No, he'll be coming back to see how we've done at manifesting his kingdom in this world and at how we've submitted to *his* leadership and *his* lordship. Let us live with Jesus' kingdom, Jesus' priorities, and Jesus' values ever before us that on that day he might say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Let us pray: Gracious Father, despite our sin and rebellion you sent your Son to become one of us, to die for our sins, and to lead us back to you. May your Spirit be at work in us always, opening our ears, our eyes, and our hearts to the values and priorities of your kingdom that we might set aside the world's and our own agendas and daily take up the agenda of your kingdom. Give us the grace to submit ourselves to

Jesus as disciples that we might always follow where he leads. We ask this in his name. Amen.