

**“Only One Thing”**  
**Luke 10:38-42**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**July 18, 2010**

Martha is doing all the things that one expects Jesus to commend: welcoming Jesus into her home. Perhaps preparing a meal, or straightening up, getting the place ready, attending to her guest's needs. From what I can tell she is a model disciple, providing the kind of hospitality that earlier in this same chapter, Jesus tells his disciples they will have to rely on. So his response is more than off-putting. “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.” We don't get to hear Martha's response, but I know what mine would be. “Okay, Jesus, I'll come and sit at your feet. You can fix your own dinner. Cold cuts are in the fridge. Mayo's on the shelf. You can sweep your own room. Broom's in the closet. You can clean your own toilet. I'll be glad to come and sit here and listen to what you have to say.

It's maddening to hear this kind of talk from Jesus especially in a church like ours. There's an abundance of work to be done. There are classes to be taught, anthems to be sung, learning camps to plan, guests from around the world to be hosted. There are committees to be staffed, four hour session meetings to endure, checks to be written, buildings to be managed, homebound people to be visited. And it ain't gonna happen by sitting at Jesus' feet. It's maddening to hear this from Jesus.

After all we are supposed to be doing all of this *for him*. He's the one who told us to go out into the world and heal the sick, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind. He's the one who sends us out to speak truth to power, and help our neighbors whenever they are in need. He's the one who showed us that the purpose of life is to serve others. He's the one who told us to take up our crosses and follow him. Yet Mary has chosen the better part. Mary has made the better choice. Mary has chosen the one thing.

I was angry about this kind of talk this particular week because I had a doozy of one. Knowing this congregation of over-achievers, some of you probably had one of those weeks too. --One of those weeks when you're eating meals in the car or not at all, cutting corners, and staying up late. I've seen some of your emails - probably sent while driving, or sent while you are supposed to be focused on other kinds of work. I know how many of you juggle life to the edge of your capabilities. I was on the phone the other day with a parent of young children when our serious planning was suddenly interrupted by an obvious emergency, “You need to go potty? You have a poopy? Andrew I'll call you right back.” I talk to some of you while you're sitting in traffic, I get some of you out for 7 o'clock meetings when you've started your work day at 7 that morning.

So I'm imagining that when you've shared a crazy week like mine, especially when you've worked overtime *for your church*, putting in more than may be good for your family, or your mental health, or your state of mind, it's not okay to hear Jesus criticize you for doing the

work that he's called us to do. It's not okay to hear Jesus criticize you for working overtime when you are making sure that his work doesn't fall by the wayside, it not okay to hear Jesus criticize you when you are juggling poop diapers for the sake of his kingdom.

You don't want his criticism, you want his recognition. I bet that's what Martha wants to hear: "Martha, this hospitality is amazing. You are truly a servant of the living God. Martha, you have outdone yourself with this hospitality. Thank you for this generous welcome. Martha, it's amazing the way you can chop vegetables, clean toilets, make the bed, bring me a glass of water, and still find time to study the Hebrew Scriptures. Thank you for setting the pattern." I think that's what Martha wants. That's probably what many of us would like to hear.

But Jesus won't do it. He will not commend it. He will not lift it up - maybe because he doesn't want his way to be the thing that pushes us to the edge of our sanity. He doesn't want his way to leave us frazzled and burned out. He doesn't want his way to be another appointment to get to, another distant friend to entertain, another relative who pop in, uninvited, and wears out his welcome. That's not the walk of faith that Jesus intends.

Jesus is supposed to lead us on the path of salvation – that's saving – and it seems to me that a lot of us need to be saved from this fragmented, accelerated world. We need to be saved from the idea that if we don't work hard enough our God won't love us. We need to be saved from the idea that if we're not always busy then we're not fulfilling God's plan. We need to be saved from our own inability to value the same kind of prayer and rest and time for others that Jesus practiced in his own walk of faith.

A few years ago, Tom Friedman, the columnist, wrote an op-ed in which he told of being driven by taxi from de Gaulle airport to Paris. During the one-hour trip, he noted that he and the taxi driver had done six things: The cabbie was driving, talking on his phone and watching a video. Friedman was riding, working on his laptop and listening to his iPod. Friedman reflects: "There was only one thing we never did: Talk to each other."<sup>1</sup> Friedman goes on in the same article to cite a technologist who has written that the disease of the Internet age is "continuous partial attention."

That's what many of us need to be saved from. The constant distraction of the busy life that leads us frazzled, drained, or burned out. It's what Martha needs to be saved from. The only difference between her and us is that she couldn't blame the Internet for her partial attention. We need time to refocus ourselves on the Jesus and on the life he calls us to lead. We need space, quiet, rest, and reflection time. We need to sit at his feet sometimes with no distractions and listen.

And if we actually heeded that call as well as many of us heed the call to go and do good work; if we actually heeded that call, we might find our lives refocused in a number of painful and hopeful ways. We might find ourselves letting go of calendar-fillers that are supposed to

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to James A. Wallace in *Feasting on the Word*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2010, p. 267 for reminding me of this article and citing its location in <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C03E1D6123FF932A35752C1A9609C8B63>.

bring meaning but do not. We might find ourselves scheduling time with the people we say we love the most – spouses and partners, children, close friends, God, and each other.

I went to national training earlier this year with the Industrial Areas Foundation – that’s the national community organizing group that BUILD is a member of. And one of the most challenging exercises that we did in that training is to record how we actually spend our time – all of it – weeks of time. Then we compared it with what we say we are called to do.

And one of my good friends tells the story of going to national training many years ago. He was in a difficult place in his life and ministry. His church work wasn’t going like he hoped it would. His marriage was having trouble. And then he did the calendar exercise. He looked at his calendar for the last several months and made a list of all the things that took up his time. When he finished that list, he said, he went back to his hotel room and wept because his wife was number 17 on the list.

It’s hard to hear Jesus criticizing us for our distraction especially when we’re doing his work. When we’re doing the stuff that he called us to do. But then again, if we’re too busy to have time for God and for each other, then we’re not really doing the stuff that he called us to do. If we’re too busy to notice that we’ve been given breath and life and a community that’s a gift even in its imperfection, we’re not really leading the life that Jesus wants for us. Jesus commends Mary because she chooses the relationship. She chooses relationship with God first. If we spend the right time in that relationship, the rest is supposed to follow.

Let me challenge you to go home this afternoon or evening and pull out your calendar and have a meeting with yourself. Ask yourself what priority you’ve given to the relationship? And be careful that you are not tempted simply to squeeze in another appointment, another engagement, another distraction to alleviate guilt. Jesus doesn’t want to heap guilt on Martha on anyone else. He wants her to be freed from it. He wants her to be freed from a fragmented life. He wants her to be fulfilled. Maybe centering that relationship means dropping things, not adding them. Consider the most important relationships in your life and then see what time you’re giving to them.

Sometimes our calendars are rearranged for us. That happened to me this week. On Wednesday a phone call offered me a choice – “I know you are busy,” the voice on the other line said, “and it’s probably too much to ask, but Mr. Petrich has asked you to come.” Most of you do not know Mr. Petrich yet we owe part of our musical legacy to his service. Fred was a voice teacher at the Peabody. In our lean years, he leaned on many of his voice students to come and sing in our choir. Music broke down many walls for him – walls of sexual orientation, walls of race, walls of Christian division. For him, it always brought him back to that one thing, to the relationship. On the way, I called home worried that this might go late into the evening. As usual, the support from home made it possible for me to make the choice to go.

I sat there with Fred while he shared his final thoughts. Death has a way of focusing all of us on the things that really matter. For him it was the people he had loved, the music he had shared, and the gardens he had tended. Three things – three priorities worth remembering, worth cherishing. And central to those three things, supporting them, sustaining them, interpreting them, was the God who now waited to receive him. Do you know, there weren’t any meetings

worth remembering, no appointments or material things worth discussing. Just a few things that were really extensions of one thing. We prayed together. I held him with his friend when he died and sat with him as the birds continued to carry song after his breath had been silenced.

Jesus tells us there is need of only one thing. It's not another appointment. It's not another thing. It's a relationship. If we learn how to sustain that relationship, it's likely that all the other ones that are important to us will get the time and attention they deserve.