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“The Better Part”

Genesis 18:1-10 Luke 10:-37-42 Colossians 1:15-28

A professor in the business school at Harvard, who was also a Time Management guru speaks about A, B, and C priorities, and then he notes that too many people spend too much of their time on the C priorities! And then he asks, "Why do you think that is?" The answer is that FIRST the C priorities are much easier to accomplish, and, SECOND they give you the impression that you are actually getting something done. In other words you can keep busy with the C priorities all day and never get to the more important things.

As President Kennedy said, “We choose to go to the moon not because it is easy. We choose to go to the moon because it is Haaaad.” That was an A priority. Yesterday was the 50th anniversary of doing something that was Haaad. Think of all the details that had to fall into place for that “One small step for man one giant leap for mankind.”

Psychologists, marriage counselors, relationship gurus of all stripes, warn us not to expect one person to provide for all our emotional, intellectual, and relational needs. We need a variety of relationships, a network of our spouse, friends, colleagues from work, golfing buddies, bridge partners, children, elders, and peers, to meet all our relational needs.

But what might be true for our human connections does not hold true for our spiritual needs. Our soul needs “one thing.” No matter what your denomination, no matter if your spiritual temperament is: exuberant, reserved, flamboyant, or meditative, whether your soul craves cathedrals, or soars under a blue sky, it is all the same as long as we have that “one thing.” That’s an A priority. I think that the “one thing” is what Mary was seeking at the feet of Jesus. It was the better part. The lesson from Mary and Martha is "Don't let the good (the C priorities) get in the way of the best (the A priorities).

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Don’t worry about things—food, drink, money, and clothes. For you already have life and a body—and they are for more important than what to eat and wear. Look at the birds! They don’t worry about what to eat—they don’t need to sow or reap or store up food—for your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are far more valuable to Him than they are. (Matt. 6:25-34 Living Bible)

When I was in Baytown we had a bird that had made a nest on top of a pillar in our covered porch. One day I thought I would help her out. I put a plate on the floor with some sunflower kernels. I was pleased to see the next morning that some of the kernels were gone! But the next time I looked I saw a squirrel scurrying away. I guess I should leave it to the Lord to provide for the birds of the air because I seem to provide for the squirrels of the ground.

Jesus tells us not to worry about those things. HOWEVER, Martha IS worried. She is worrying about what THEY are going to eat and drink. She is worrying about how she is going to get it all done. She is busy rushing around trying to make sure everything is perfect.

She reminds me of a famous Martha from our time, Martha Stewart. I can imagine Martha Stewart fussing over the perfect table setting, the most delicious and perhaps elaborate meal, adjusting every little detail until it is just so...and only when everything is perfectly in place, turning to the guests to enjoy their company.

There is a lot of joy to be taken in being a host or hostess and doing something gracious for your guests, but it should never compromise the time we have to really enjoy our contact with them, especially when it starts to feel like 'work' as Martha clearly expresses. Jesus' friend Martha is so busy "serving" she completely forgets whom she is serving.

Tuesday night we had our family dinner to celebrate our son's 36th birthday. Anne worked hard to provide a delightful dinner. She started cooking on Sunday night. We had a wonderful time being with each other and sharing what we loved about him on his special day. We could have had beanie weenies and still had a great time. What mattered most was the words we shared and he heard.

Frustrated at her sister Mary's inactivity, Martha is so wrapped up in her own agenda that she plants herself in front of Jesus and demands that he do something about her sister. Martha is hosting the Messiah; the gospel is being proclaimed in her living room and she complains to the "Lord" that she is doing all the work herself, and couldn't Jesus please get Mary up from the ground at his feet and lend a hand.

No wonder Jesus describes Martha as being in an "uproar," disturbed and distracted. Jesus is gently reminding his hostess that "hospitality" is about more about room in your heart than how clean are the rooms in your house.

While Martha was busy being distracted, Mary was busy being instructed. Mary sat at Jesus' feet. She listened to every word he spoke. She attended fully to his words. Martha admitted and welcomed guests into her home. Mary admitted and welcomed the word of the Lord into her heart.

I think that one of the things Jesus is praising in Mary's behavior is her careful listening and just being present with her guests. Jesus is telling us that there is great wisdom in letting the dishes soak in the sink so we can let his words soak in our spirits.

Max Lucado is right on target when he writes: "Every church needs a Martha. Change that. Every church needs a lot of Marthas with sleeves rolled up and

ready, they keep the pace for the church. Because of Marthas the church budgets get balanced church buildings get repaired and babies get bounced on loving knees in the nursery. You don't appreciate Marthas until a Martha is missing and all the Marys of the church start scrambling to find the keys to lock doors, turn off the lights and turn off the air conditioning. Martha was a live wire to be sure. However, even live wires need a time out for recharging. Work without worship will soon burn you out. Even in church we can lose our sense of perspective.” 1

We couldn't have had such a wonderful loving reception for Elise Roach yesterday without an army of Marthas. Raise your hand if you had a hand in providing that reception yesterday. That was a C priority. But where are you now? Here addressing you're A priority.

If you are one of those who has stepped up to serve at the Vacation Bible School starting tomorrow would you please stand. That is a B+ priority. But you are here this morning addressing you're A priority. Thank you for your dedication.

Today, we have a lot of well-meaning, well-planning, well-organized Marthas. They are constantly in the “kitchen”, banging pots and pans, “cooking up new plots and plans. These are good things. Whatever we strategize, whatever long-range plans or short-term project we energize whatever goals we are going for — we need to always keep first and foremost the reason for the church's existence —to hear and share the words and love of Jesus. It's like breathing.....inhaling and exhaling are both highly recommended. To only inhale is to hyperventilate. To only exhale is to suffocate. It's not an either or, it's a both and.

As disciples of Jesus we are to continually do acts of love and charity, but we do so not to earn our salvation but to give expression to it. Being a disciple of Jesus is about keeping commandments, but we keep the commandments because we love the commander. I don't believe for a moment that Jesus loved Mary more than Martha, nor did he treasure Mary's devotion more than Martha's dessert.

This was an important time in Jesus' ministry. He knew something that Martha did not. He knew his time with them was short. There wouldn't be many more opportunities for them to be together. And so, with love in his eyes and a tender smile on his lips, Jesus said to Martha, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

I believe Jesus was saying to Martha, “Martha, you have so many things on your mind, but right now I need you to focus on just one thing. There will be other times when Mary can help you with the housework. Right now I need for you both to hear what I have to say about the coming Kingdom.”

Jesus was not denigrating Martha's role as the one entertaining. He was simply saying that there is a time and a place for everything, and right now he needed

them to focus on his mission from the Father. There is nothing wrong with hard work as long as it does not stand in the way of close relationships with other people and with God.

Gordon Dahl in his book Work, Play, and Worship in a Leisure Oriented Society is quoted as saying that “most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship. As a result, their meanings and values are distorted. Their relationships disintegrate faster than they can keep them in repair and their lifestyles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot.”

There is more truth to that than we would like to admit. Worship is an essential part of a well balanced life. Regular worship produces satisfying lives. Regular worship produces healthier families. People who worship regularly live longer.

Many of you are very busy people. You're busy in the community. You're busy at your job. You're busy at church. . But have you found that one thing that is needed, that one thing that will transform you and give you a peace that surpasses understanding? Take a clue from Martha's sister Mary. The most important thing you can do is to take a few moments each day and spend it in prayer and meditation and scripture. Take time to hear God speak to you through his Holy Spirit as you read God's word. Sense God's guiding hand as you seek to do God's will so that God's kingdom will come, and God's will, will be done on earth as it is being done in heaven.

Writer Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day," he recalled in his book Stress Fractures. "Before long, things around our home started reflecting the pattern of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable.

"I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.'

"Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.'" "I'll never forget her answer: 'Then listen slowly.'" 2

Let the dishes soak. Let the Word soak in. Don't neglect ... the better part.

1 A Gentle Thunder, Word Publishing, page 127. by Max Lucado

2. Stress Fractures Chuck Swindoll.

Let's pray. O God, often we are quick to complain about all that we have to do, and forget that we should be thankful for every opportunity to serve you. Teach us to take time to sit at your feet and learn the lessons that will enable us to do the work with grateful hearts.

Patient God, we need to learn from you. We get caught up in busy activity, hoping people will notice how hard we are working, but we forget that what we need most is to wait patiently for your Word. In this time of worship, Lord, we sit at your feet, waiting patiently for your Word that will enlighten our path and lighten our burden. Hear now the prayer of your people.