

ONLY ONE THING IS NEEDED

Luke 10.38-42. *As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "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."*

P. Once upon a time there was a church. It was a First Church, a downtown church, a traditional church. It was located across the street from the local emergency shelter, home of many of the city's homeless. The spirit of God moved within this church and sent some of its members across the street to join the poor in regular fellowship. Working through this most humble of ministries, the spirit began to awaken senses of service and hospitality in other church members. Some of these began to feed the poor, and still others began witnessing to them on the street, loving them openly and radically. Over time, through the work of these faithful members of the church and community, a truly jarring thing began to happen, first slowly, then with great obviousness: The working poor and the homeless began showing up *inside the actual church building!* At Sunday worship. At Saturday service projects. At Christmas morning breakfast. And, most significantly: The homeless and the downtrodden, the forgotten and the weary, the very least of these, began showing up at that most venerable and time-honored of Southern Protestant rituals: Wednesday Night Supper. And those in poverty were welcomed and loved in God's house. There they were provided for; there they found shelter and food. Together, the wealthy and the poor broke bread. Together they served one another, together they cleaned up. What I'm saying is, communion happened. The poor were welcomed in that church, and the kingdom of God was made visible. It was a miracle.

E. Once upon a time there were two sisters. Mary was quiet and introspective. She loved words and stories. Through them the spirit of God spoke to her, forming her moral imag-

ination and producing in her a deep love for the world. On the other hand, Martha was gregarious and outward-focused. Dependable and optimistic, she loved the movement and activity of daily life and she honored God through the work of her hands. Above all she loved making things: food, clothes, a beautiful home. Such was her home that Mary preferred to spend her days there instead of at her own rather unkempt house down the street.

One day Jesus of Nazareth, a famous teacher, came to their town. Both sisters had heard wonderful things about Jesus but had never met him. Curious, Mary and Martha ventured out to hear him teaching on the edge of town. Mary sat transfixed by the sound of his voice and by his colorful and witty parables. She had heard many storytellers and preachers but Jesus seemed altogether different. Martha saw him and loved him because he seemed a bit raggedy, weary and dust-covered. He seemed like he needed things. So she invited him to her house. There the homeless man would be welcomed, sheltered, and fed. Jesus accepted her invitation with a tired smile and she immediately took off for home so things would be in order when he arrived. Mary led him to Martha's home, hanging onto his every word. And when he arrived he felt suddenly relieved – it had been a long day. To sit and rest in such a beautiful home was more than he had expected. The weary and homeless Jesus was welcomed in Martha's house, and the kingdom of God was made visible. It was a miracle.

P. For some reason the kingdom of God seems to fade as soon as it is recognized. This happened at the church. Not everyone in the church was of the same mind when it came to serving the poor and homeless. Those who worked in the community kitchen thought feeding their bodies was the main thing and the street ministers believed that it was their souls that needed feeding first.

One cold winter day the community kitchen volunteers were setting up for another day of feeding the city's poor and homeless. As they were busy in the kitchen, someone else was setting up in the lobby. The street ministers had decided to set up a prayer station in that space so that the day's guests would pass it on their way to the dining room. He and his friends were ready with stacks of Bibles, a large banner that read "Jesus Saves," and

a prayer bench. They planned to ask the guests if they knew Jesus and if they would like someone to pray for them.

This did not go unnoticed by those who were staffing the community kitchen that day. The prayer station was not appreciated. The volunteers began to talk among themselves, saying, “How can they co-opt our ministry like that?” and “We’re offering a free meal – not a reward for being saved!” In short, those working in the kitchen became distracted from the task at hand. There was more talking and complaining than there was cooking and serving. Some became so preoccupied with the street ministers and their prayer station that they could do no work at all. Instead they stood in the doorway, watching those crazy men stacking Bibles. As if that’s what cold, hungry people needed before a hot meal! Bibles! But deep down they felt as if they had competition. No one had even asked them about this.

E. For some reason the kingdom of God seems to fade as soon as it is recognized. Yet it did not fade for Mary, who found herself seated before Jesus, listening to him speak of God’s immanence and great love. He spoke in vivid images and simple stories. The truth is, Jesus disarmed Mary completely. His presence exposed her somehow, made her vulnerable, even embarrassed her in a way; yet he left her feeling profoundly secure. She could not remember being happier in her life.

But the kingdom of God had faded for Martha, who could certainly remember being happier. She had a *lot* to do. Nothing seemed to be working in the kitchen; somehow her timing was off and the meal was not shaping up as she had hoped. In addition, the eggs that had been there that morning had disappeared. She did not know where they had gone, but she suspected she knew someone who did. So she walked into the front room to ask Mary about the eggs, and what did she see? There was her crazy sister, sitting on the floor and looking all starry-eyed up at Jesus, who was talking about some poor boy craving pig slop. What in the world? She stood in the doorway for a moment, amazed at Mary’s incredible cluelessness. The girl didn’t know how to cook properly, but she could definitely help out in a pinch, and was this *ever* a pinch. Martha thought about saying something but bit her

tongue. She returned to the kitchen, resigned to finding a decent egg substitute on her own.

P. The director of the community kitchen gazed out the window. The line of people waiting for a hot meal was the longest she had ever seen. She was anxious, because the kitchen volunteers were far behind in their work and lunch hour was at hand. She knew that, for the first time in years, some guests would be turned away. *What had gone wrong?* she asked herself. Before she could think of an answer, the door opened and the crowd entered along with a blast of cold air. In frustration she saw several guests being approached by the men at the prayer station. The men hugged them, smiled at them, looked them in the eye, and sat down with them. They prayed with them. And it dawned on her that these very guests, who had been among the first to arrive, would be the ones turned away without a meal. Because of those men with Bibles! She became angry and entered the lobby. She turned to one of the seated homeless men and said, “Tell these fellows you will talk later. They should be helping in the kitchen. You can pray anytime. Come along now, or you will have no food.” To which the man replied, “No thank you. This is what I need right now.” Amazed, she stood staring at the man for a moment. Then she slowly returned to the kitchen and got back to work.

E. After more time in the kitchen, Martha stopped and gazed back through the doorway at Jesus and her sister. Jesus was special; she knew that. He deserved the best meal she could afford. But it was not going to happen. That was obvious. The meal had flopped and she was facing the possibility of root vegetables, bread, cheese, and old wine. Again. Was there no way out of that bleak prospect? If only Mary would help her. Suddenly Jesus’s face lit up and he said something – Martha could not tell what – and he and Mary burst out in loud laughter together. They were in hysterics. That did it. Martha marched into the front room and said to Jesus, “Can’t you tell Mary to help me in the kitchen? I can’t do all of this work alone!” Jesus was surprised and could barely contain his smile as he said, “Oh, Martha. Mary is of a single mind but you are divided. Let her have the one thing she has

chosen, for it is hers and she will not lose it. You have also chosen what is yours but have not accepted it. Be like Mary and perhaps you also will not lose it.” She stood staring at Jesus for a moment. Then she returned to the kitchen and got back to work.

P. Whether you are the director of the community kitchen or the men at the prayer station, you must remain focused on those you serve. And to do that you must spend time sitting with the low and marginalized among us, listening to every word they say, communing with them. It is not that feeding the soul is more important than feeding the body. Our bodies are not mere containers of souls. *We are souls and we are bodies. To stress the distinction is to miss the point.* The director’s vice was not that she preferred doing for her guests to listening to them, but that she let trivial things derail her ministry. She had chosen Jesus – this is evident by her gracious hospitality to the least of these – but did not remain true to that choice. In her activity she became distracted, resentful, and divided against herself. She became dissatisfied to merely serve Jesus. And the virtue of the men at the prayer station was not that they preferred souls to bodies, but that their focus on the poor and downtrodden was single. They could not be distracted from what they had chosen and they had chosen the least of these. They had chosen none but Jesus.

E. Whether you are Martha or Mary, you must remain focused on Jesus. And to do that you must spend time sitting at the feet of Christ, listening to every word he says, communing with him. It is not that feeding the soul is more important than feeding the body. Our bodies are not mere containers of souls. *We are souls and we are bodies. To stress the distinction is to miss the point.* Martha’s vice was not that she preferred doing for Jesus to listening to him, but that she let trivial things derail her ministry. Martha had chosen Jesus – this is evident by her gracious hospitality – but did not remain true to that choice. In her activity she became distracted, resentful, and divided against herself. She became dissatisfied to merely serve Jesus. And Mary’s virtue was not that she preferred souls to bodies, but that her focus on the weary and downtrodden Jesus was single. She could not be

distracted from what she had chosen and she had chosen the words of life. She had chosen none but Jesus.

May we as a church and as individuals learn to do the same. Amen.