

“What is the One Thing Needful?”

Luke 10:38 – 42

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepared sermon from the Pastor (Dr) Nicholas Fuller, Christ Lutheran of Irvington.

“When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem.” (Luke. 9:51). The journey to Jerusalem continues.

“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 named Mary who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His teaching.”

You will recall that two Sundays ago Pastor John’s sermon covered Jesus sending 72 disciples ahead of him with His message of ***“peace be to this house. The kingdom of God is at hand,”*** instructing them that when they came to a house that welcomed them, they were to stay in that house. No doubt, they had reached this village and knocked on this door and were welcomed into this house. Returning to Jesus, they would have told Him, ***“when you enter this village, go to the house of a woman named Martha. She will welcome you.”***

The first verse of the Hymn: One thing’s Needful summarises well the visit of Jesus to Mary and Martha recorded in Luke Chapter 10: ***“One thing’s needful Lord, this treasure teach me highly to regard. All else though it first give pleasure, is a yoke that presses hard! Beneath it the heart is still fretting and striving, no true lasting happiness ever deriving. This one thing is needful; all others are vain- I count all but loss that I Christ may obtain!”***

Verse 2 even describes and celebrates Mary’s careful savouring of each word He spoke, her devotion to Jesus where ***“all earthly concerns she forgot for her Lord And found her contentment in hearing His Word.”***

The phrase Jesus speaks: ***“One thing is needful”*** is so memorable I have quoted it to myself countless times. Often in my life the events of a day or a week tempt me to go in so many directions, that I find it essential to refocus by speaking to myself the counsel Jesus gave to Martha, One thing is needful. But exactly what is the one thing that is needful?

Mary and Martha have the privilege of hosting Jesus at their home. Jesus and the disciples were passing through the village, and they stopped at their home. In other words, this was an unplanned visit.

Talk about a once in a lifetime surprise visit. I imagine both Mary and Martha felt an initial desire to hurry up and make the house spotless. Think if you were in their place! You would probably wish you had more advance warning that Jesus was coming. 'Lord if I had known you would have been coming to stop by I would have planned my day much differently. I would have gone to the market and bought the best produce and cheese I could find. – And the best wine.'

You can imagine the desire to impress and be a gracious host would continue for as long as Jesus was there. It might be a little difficult relaxing and taking in the evening with Jesus as a guest. Can I fix you anything else Lord?

There is nothing wrong with putting great energy and devotion into your role as host. It is likely that Martha was the owner of the house and therefore had the responsibility and privilege of preparing a meal for Jesus. We see a very similar situation in the appointed Old Testament reading (Genesis 18:1-10) where Abraham works to prepare a feast for the Lord in the form of these heavenly visitors that have come to his house. Abraham works hard in his role as host. He does not even try and make small talk with his guests until the task is complete.

There is something different about the way that Martha handles her role of host. She wants her work to be recognised as more valuable than the work of listening to Jesus. Work that began as a devotion to Jesus became complicated by the sins of resentment and envy.

The resentment builds up and festers to the point where she wants to call attention to the situation. You can just picture her intentionally clanging pots and making noise so that Mary could not help but hear what Martha is busy with. Then her patience comes to an end and she interrupts Jesus while he is teaching. **“Lord don’t you care that my sister just sits, while I am slaving away here in the kitchen?”**

In her mind she was completely justified in her complaint. Clearly it was unfair that she was left to do all the work by herself. But then Jesus turns his attention to her, and lovingly turns her perspective upside down. Jesus tells her that one thing is needful and Mary has chosen that thing. Nothing can be said against her.

On the surface it was easy for Martha to believe she was doing exactly what she should be doing. Her preparations were useful and important. Perhaps she even carried them out with a spirit of devotion to Jesus. But the problem was that this devotion was carried out over and above actually hearing from Jesus.

It is a characteristic of the kingdom of God that man's idea of right and wrong is not the same as God's. In this case Jesus was not expecting to be pampered with the best Martha could offer. Jesus did not come to be served by us, but to serve us and even lay down his life for us. He does not need us to work to please him, but instead he is here to be our Saviour and fill us with the joy of his Word.

In verse 38 as the Gospel reading begins, we read the disciples were on their way. Where were they on their way too? Simply put they were on their way where Jesus was leading. Jesus was on his way to the cross.

There would be perhaps no other opportunity like this for Mary and Martha to hear from Jesus. For Mary it was a time to listen from the start, for Martha it became a time to serve to the exclusion of listening.

The scripture describes Martha as being distracted. To be distracted means that you may start off on track and focused, but eventually something else pulls you away in a different direction. Perhaps she started off listening alongside Mary but saw it was getting closer to Supper time and couldn't help but start with preparations.

For Martha the distractions were not necessarily self-centred pursuits. Martha was doing things that a person can reasonably expect to do. Likewise, we often find ourselves with situations in which others need our help to the point where we become distracted from other things we are also responsible for in life.

There is no shortage of distractions in the world we live in today. In recent years of counselling at a mental health agency, I continue to be struck at how often people will speak about political spin, news stories and opinions on social media, about political issues as things that contribute to them feeling bad about themselves or their lives. What a convenient distraction from the problems of our own lives – to find an enemy and scapegoat on the news or the internet.

At the same time much closer to home daily life provides its own level of distractions. Australians feel more busy and starved of time for themselves than perhaps ever before. Technology brings the responsibilities of the workplace to our very homes, where many fields of work involve a feeling of being on call all of the time. Families with school age children find themselves scrambling from one practice and event to another with limited times of the whole family having time together.

We have become a culture quite saturated with distraction. Because it is so easy to become distracted, these words of Jesus are so important: One thing is necessary. There are many times when we must order things in our lives, but when the time comes for us to receive the love of Jesus delivered in God's Word, that is beyond doubt the only thing necessary.

God's Word challenges us to ask, "Do you view hearing God's Word as a fundamental basic necessity of life"? As part of our human nature, we experience an internal battle between balancing the things that we really need to do and those things that we would like to do.

Our greatest need is to receive the Gospel and receive God's perfect love in Christ. The things we consider most needful by our human perspective are exactly the things that can and will go wrong. The gift of the Gospel never disappoints us.

With respect to our need to hear God's Word our Gospel account is very instructional and normative for describing how we can live our daily lives according to what is truly needful. But with respect to the needs of our brothers and sisters who do not know Christ, our reading is not suggesting that the most important thing we can do is sit in church every Sunday – and not care about those who are lost.

With respect to those who do not know the Lord, it is needful for us share the Gospel. It is one thing to be like Martha and be misguided in how you spend your time or in how you try to serve God. It is another thing to be like those who had no interest in having Jesus over at their house at all.

When it comes to properly choosing what is needful, I fail every week, and even every day with some of the decisions I make to be busy doing instead of listening to God's Word. I think it's safe to say that all pastors on a regular basis fail to properly discern what is needful in this way. In fact all of us fail, just like Martha in putting the right priority on our time with Jesus. Because of sin we make the wrong choice all the time as far as what is needful.

But just as Jesus forgave Martha and lovingly corrected her priorities, He forgives us and leads us back to His Word. We enjoy clarity from God's Word in our lives not because we are wise enough to prioritise God over other interests or responsibilities. We have clarity for what we need in life for the simple reason that Jesus comes to us, forgives us and restores us as a new creation. May our Lord's love for us shown on the cross provide this perfect clarity to us each and every day. **AMEN.**

Now may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sermon read by Phillip Edwards 17 July 2022

Reference

Accessed at: <https://christlutheranindy.org/index.php/2019/08/01/what-is-the-one-thing-needful/>

Accessed on: 5 July 2022.