

The One Thing
Surprising Stories of Jesus
Luke 10: 38-42
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We are in the middle of a series titled Surprising Stories of Jesus. We are walking through stories in the middle of the Gospel of Luke, and in each story Jesus does something surprising, or something surprising happens because of Jesus. We usually speak of today's story as the story of Mary and Martha, but it could be called the Story of the Female disciple. This is part of what is surprising here, but not all.

I love this little story. I'm rooting for Mary. I feel for Martha. I look up to Jesus.

This story immediately follows the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke, and the two stories are meant to be read together. At the beginning of the Good Samaritan story, Jesus is responding to a lawyer who is challenging him and the Great Commandment comes out: "Love God and love neighbor, do that and you will live." Jesus says.

The lawyer asks, "who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan. The Samaritan is despised, but he proves the hero in this story, the neighbor, the one who shows mercy.

Every society has spoken and unspoken rules for how far our neighborliness is supposed to stretch. Jesus consistently stretches the understanding of neighborliness even more, breaks it open. The moral of the story is treat others with mercy, but the command to love the neighbor can't be separated from Jesus' habit of overturning what is socially acceptable. Loving the neighbor is all wrapped up in treating a despised one as valuable and worthy too.

Jesus does the same thing in the story of Mary and Martha, but where the Good Samaritan is an illustration of loving the neighbor, Mary and Martha is an illustration of the first part of the Great Commandment: Loving God, listening to the Word.

Our story for today is part of a scene where Jesus commissions a group of seventy to go out two by two and proclaim and embody the Realm of God: to heal, to make whole. They are to travel light, "no bag, no purse, no sandals," and to rely on the hospitality of people along the way. If people welcome them into the house there will be blessing, if they don't there will be curses. They go out and they come back, and they have been successful. They are so excited and they tell Jesus all about it. Jesus is pleased, but there's tough love too.

The Good Samaritan story happens as a part of this scene with the crowd of seventy.

Now our story for today starts, “now as they went on their way.” In other words, “now as this group of seventy went on their way.” Jesus says, “Let’s go to Martha’s house.” How would you feel if you were Martha and Jesus shows up with a built in party?

Martha does exactly what she is supposed to do. She invites Jesus in. She offers the hospitality that disciples are supposed to receive along the road. She will be blessed. Martha gets to work. She starts doing all the things. She can do this. She’s good at it. But she needs a sous chef to pull it off.

Last Sunday evening we hosted a neighborhood party in our backyard. For the last six years Sara and I have been saying, “we should invite the neighbors over and have a block party. This year Sara said, “we’re doing it, and she sent out invitations. As the party approached, we were running around like Martha. I was on grill duty tending the flames. As people were arriving, I could briefly greet them, but then I’d have to say, “I have to go back and make sure the burgers don’t burn. People starting talking. The good stuff was happening. Neighbors who didn’t know one another were introducing themselves and getting acquainted. I couldn’t jump in though, there was too much to do to make this the best pastor party 3rd St. W. had ever seen.

I feel for Martha. She is showing her love and care, she is giving by providing water and food and meeting needs. She is sacrificing what she might want so that other more important work might be done. But then there’s Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet. Listening. Slacking off. Conveniently getting out of work. Not being neighborly or loving towards Martha.

Luckily at LippertFest 2018, everyone was pulling their weight. Even our children were helping out - a little bit. If either Sara or I had been sitting out and hanging out while the other was doing all the work, LippertFest 2018 would have come with free fireworks.

I understand how offensive Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet is, but it's this sitting that is so important and so surprising. Mary is doing what disciples do: sitting at the feet of a teacher. She has dropped everything to pay attention to the word of God coming through Jesus, to hear about the Realm of God as Jesus is teaching about it and embodying it.

Mary is showing us what the first part of the Great Commandment looks like: Love God with all your heart, mind, and strength. And, like with the Good Samaritan, in this story too, living out the Great Commandment is all wrapped up in breaking open social acceptable and expected. Just as a despised one of the time shows us what it looks like to be a neighbor, here

a woman steps out of her expected role of the time, providing hospitality, and she steps into the realm of men, being a disciple, sitting at a teacher's feet.

Martha asks Jesus to put Mary in her place. She is stressed and irritated. A reader would expect Jesus to side with Martha, to say that she is out of place, but Jesus responds to Martha, "Martha, Martha...(breath), you are worried and distracted by many things." Martha's thinking, "yeah I am, you brought a party to my house."

Jesus says, "there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her."

There is a debate in the New Testament about the role and place of women in the early church. On one side there are verses like those that say women should not speak in church. But on the other side are stories and verses that are encouraging women into leadership. This is one of them, and it is surprising for the time. The command to love God with all our heart is illustrated by Mary, sitting at Jesus feet as a disciple, where men sit, being the faithful one. Jesus does not rebuke her, he encourages Mary on.

Jesus' statement, "there is need of only one thing," is a statement I'm drawn to. "Make it simple for me Jesus!" in this hurried, busy, frantic time.

I went to the Northfield Area Interfaith Association meeting this week. I was late because I was trying to jam in some other tasks before it started. I got there as Northfield area religious leaders were going around sharing a prayer request for the fall. Father Denny, priest at St. Dominic's asked for prayers for the Hispanic community and his ministry with them, others prayed for their children going to school for the first time, for family crisis they are living through, one clergy person, who will go unnamed, asked for prayers for a winning round of Bingo at Defeat Days. It was clearly a deep longing.

I shared that I have a few extra things happening this fall, and I'm noticing how many others have extra things happening now too: how many others are taking on new responsibilities, children and youth taking on new challenges, people managing vocational transition, absorbing family health crises, walking with loved ones, tending to their own hearts, and holding everything else too.

As I notice all of this, I'm drawn to Mary and surprised by her. She stops. She stops. In the midst of the busyness, in the midst of the whirlwind of the party, she stops. Even when Martha is mad at her, telling her that she isn't doing what she is supposed to be doing, what she is expected to do, she listens to her heart, and she stops, and she sits at Jesus feet.

She listens for the holy. She pays attention, heart open. She knows she needs to. She doesn't want to miss it. She models staying centered in God. My assumption about Mary is that she was working before Jesus showed up, and that she will be working afterwards, but we see her stopping and listening for the Holy, we see her giving time to the Sacred, loving God. We see her paying attention to the One Thing. It looks like Sabbath, what Mary is doing. In the Biblical tradition, there's a fine line between not working, resting, leisure, and worship. They get mixed together.

I've been paying attention to the moments when I stop. I have a cylinder of netting in the kitchen that has monarch caterpillars in it. As Ruthie and I found caterpillars and brought in more milkweed from the yard to feed them, there were usually more eggs and young caterpillars on the new milkweed. We now have 18 monarch caterpillars in chrysalis, 2 more caterpillars eating and growing. It's a net of miracles. My family will tell you I sit there a lot. I look and I watch. I feel amazed again.

I've been looking for time to stop and sit in my most important relationships. They feed me, sustain me, anchor me. If I step back and think theologically about them, I know I meet God in the love and grace that is there.

I have an on again off again contemplative practice, centering prayer. It was dormant, but the last few weeks I've wrestled it back into a place of priority because it is life-giving.

Where are those places where you can stop and sit at the feet of the holy, open your heart, rest? I hope the church is one place for you. Where else: nature, solitude, contemplative or faith practice, being in relationship. Where are those places where you pay attention to the One Thing, that orders all other things. The One Thing that feeds our soul. The One Thing that saves our soul. The One Thing that draws our soul outward. May we find time to sit there.

May God bless us on the journey. Amen.