
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

There Is Need of Only One Thing

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Luke 10: 38-42

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I'd like to take a vote this morning. In the interest of self-interest, only women get to vote. All those in favor of Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, raise your hands! All those in favor of Martha, preparing the meal, cooking, cleaning serving with love, raise your hands! Those of you who felt excluded by the vote, raise your hands!

Welcome to our world, the Mary/Martha world. For as long as women can remember, we have heard sermon after sermon tell us we are, or ought to be, more like Mary or more like Martha, as if it were an either/or choice, one right, one wrong, one good, one bad, one better, one worse. In the Mary/Martha world, Mary is exalted as the 'spiritual' one, contemplative, the sponge sitting at the feet of Jesus soaking up his every word. Martha is the 'distracted' one, the worrier, the worldly one. "Chill, Martha. Don't worry. Be happy. Martha, Martha, look at Mary, she has chosen the better part. There is need of only one thing."

And what would that one thing be, Jesus? Would the one thing be that you and seventy of your best friends have just showed up at my doorstep, unannounced, dirty, smelly, not to mention hungry? It is not like you and your seventy best friends called ahead on your cell phones and told me you were coming to dinner. Here we are in Bethany, remember that seventeen miles between Jericho going up to Jerusalem from last week and the Samaritan? Here we are in Bethany, fifteen of those miles away from Jericho, a mile and a half from Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. We are used to people stopping in Bethany, half an hour from Jerusalem, on their way to the festivals and feast days. Bethany with our sweet figs. Bethany with our hospitality for pilgrims on a journey, trekking those long, last uphill miles. Their water is gone. Their feet are tired and bruised. The children are crying, "Are we there yet?"

Sure, Jesus, you and your seventy best friends come on in. It has been a good fall harvest and we still have provisions from the winter and even the spring has been kind to us. "Do you mind, Jesus, if I step out and get a few things together, like dinner for seventy? Let me see if Pizza Hut delivers on a Sabbath."

What if Jesus had said, "Martha, Martha, not a problem, we brought food with us. Let us guys cook dinner. Go and invite your neighbors in too. Maybe they would like to listen in. We have some wonderful stories to tell. You won't believe what God has been up to in our lives. And the dishes, don't worry, us guys will do the dishes. You just listen. What I have to say, Martha, Mary, is for you too, for you especially."

And Jesus said, "There is need of only one thing."

That's it, Jesus? You walked all over the countryside to say that? "There is need of only one thing?" You sent out seventy people into the highways and byways, the towns and the cities, and you walk them from Jericho almost to Jerusalem and all you got is, "There is need of only one thing?" I know, Jesus, I can see it in your eyes, that you have set your face toward Jerusalem and there is no turning you back now. I know that you are about to bring it before the priests and the powers, and I can hear you before God and everybody, "There is need of only one thing."

What is your 'one thing'?

Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, is attributed to saying, "The main thing is keeping the main thing the main thing." Or said another way, "First things first". We all live by the clock:

gotta be here by 9, finished by 10, on to the next and the next. I am just so busy. Don't you see how busy I am? I not only run myself ragged, I run you ragged just by you watching me!

We all live by the clock of scheduling. AND, we also live by a compass, our 'true north', our priorities and our values. Clock and compass, not clock over compass, or compass over clock. Jesus said, "There is need of only one thing."

Covey coined the phrase 'abundance mentality' or 'abundance mindset', in which a person believes there are enough resources and success to share with others. With an abundance mentality, I can celebrate the success of others rather than be threatened by their success.¹

Jesus said, "There is need of only one thing." Abundance. That's our clock and that's our compass. Abundance.

Martha and Mary were surprised by seventy hungry, dirty, smelly men showing up for dinner. Do we hear anything about they went away hungry, unfed, un-welcome? Abundance.

Martha and Mary, yeah, they had a little 'sister' thing going, "I want to listen to Jesus; can't I just sit down for one minute?" versus, "Well, I'd like to hear him too and this is my house. Oh, all right, the dishes will wait, we may never get this chance again." Abundance.

It is in the letting go of all the fears of scarcity, (will I have enough, will I be enough, will I give enough), that we latch on instead to Abundance, "I am enough. I have enough. I have enough to give." Abundance mentality begins our Upward Spiral: we grow, we change, we improve. We learn. We commit. We do. We find our voice and we inspire others to find theirs. In Covey's words, we move from Effectiveness to Greatness. In Jesus' words, we know the one thing that is needed. In Covey's words, we move away from the 6 C-words, six cancers: Cynicism, criticism, comparing, competing, complaining and contending.² In Jesus' words, we live the one thing that is needed.

Of all the women in the Bible stories, I never would have said that the story of Mary and Martha was one with which I really resonated or connected. Hearing and reading Mary and Martha again for the first time, I know now that the interpretation has always been a hermeneutics of scarcity. Mary *or* Martha, which one do you like and vote for? You can't vote for both. Choose one or the other.

How would a hermeneutics, an interpretation of abundance, read? Mary and Martha. Two women. Generous to a fault. Here they go opening up their family home once again. It wasn't just their house. It was a family home, intergenerational, interconnected, and interdependent. These two women knew they could not survive on their own. They needed one another. They needed the community that surrounded them. They needed to give, because of the abundance, not the scarcity, in their lives. Jesus stopping at their house was a blessing of that abundance. Of all the houses Jesus could have stopped at, he stopped at their house.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Seven_Habits_of_Highly_Effective_People

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_8th_Habit:_From_Effectiveness_to_Greatness

It was as if Jesus saw something in them which said, “Welcome. We are Mary and Martha. We are sisters. This is our home. We are blessed that you would come in. Teach us more.”

So Jesus sat down in the outer courtyard of the home of the sisters Mary and Martha, and as he began to speak, everyone leaned forward, longing to hear every word. “Thank you for the food you so graciously provided us. Thank you for the water that has quenched our parched lips and wetted our dusty brows. Thank you for the extravagant welcome that receives us travelers on a journey. There is need of only one thing and you have shown it. Abundance.”

Luke is the only Gospel sharer that tells this story in this way. In John’s Gospel, Mary and Martha are good friends of Jesus and Jesus has raised their brother Lazarus from the dead, and Mary is so grateful she anoints Jesus’ feet with the expensive perfume. But in Luke, Mary and Martha might very well be perfect strangers to Jesus, women of welcome with whom he shares the good news of there is only need of one thing: Abundance.

I invite you to think about Abundance in your life these next few days and weeks. I have a head start on you, so let me share some of the Abundance I have blessed by lately:

A woman apologized to me this week for the hurt she had caused. She didn’t have to. It was done in a spirit of Abundance.

You may look out at the pews (and chairs) and say, “Where have all the people gone?” I look out and say, “It’s hot in Phoenix...and the couple who sits there is in California visiting an aunt who had a stroke, and the guy over there, he’s in Texas with his nephew. Thank you Church of the Beatitudes for the prayers...Abundance.”

I was on Facebook, aren’t we all wasting our time on Facebook?, and someone had posted on their home page, “I am looking for my broom tree, to find that place of rest for my soul.” Something I referred to in a sermon a few weeks ago. Abundance.

This week, though you may not see it, I do: people are gearing up for Maryland Avenue school supplies, and for the next trip to Nicaragua, and the Bishop’s Pantry once again has food, and cold water is in our refrigerators for strangers who come to our doors, like Mary and Martha’s and ask for our hospitality. Abundance.

I could go on and on and talk about abundance and I imagine if you thought about it very long, you could too. I was not a math major, but this I know, one plus one plus one plus all of us together is so much more together than we are apart. Abundance. Amen.