

# One Thing Is Needed

*A sermon on Luke 10:38-42 by the Revd Daniel Bullock,  
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Right up front I want to make a confession: I have a type A personality. I am an activist, I'm pragmatic, I like to do things the right way, I don't like to let people down and I strive to fulfil expectations - even if those expectations are my own. On the one hand, this type of personality I have is great, because it allows me to get a lot done and it has served me well in my life and ministry. But on the other hand, I have found that if I am not careful, I can easily slip into a driven-ness mode and when I am in that mode it is easy for me to miss the special and unique moments of life. In this mode I often miss important cues in conversations and relationships. I sometimes fail to offer compassion when someone is struggling, or rejoice and celebrate in the moment when someone shares good news.

Because I know this about myself, I have worked at adopting certain rhythms and practices in life that help me slow down, that help me connect with God, that help me gain a clearer perspective of life and the needs and concerns of other people. My rhythms include daily time in a café with a coffee reading Scripture, journaling and praying, making sure I have a day of rest (Sabbath) once a week, quarterly prayer days and annual spiritual retreats. My rhythms and disciplines have served me well over the years.

However, the reality is, at times I have to work hard at not making my rhythms and disciplines a task in and of themselves! At other times I am easily distracted and can find more important or urgent things to do instead of my regular spiritual rhythms.

In that sense I find that I resonate a fair bit with the character of Martha in the gospel story today. I am sure that all of us here tonight, depending on our personality and experiences in life, resonate with either Martha or Mary in some way, shape or form. We either lean towards activism or contemplation.

I don't think this passage is telling us that one type of personality is better than the other, rather I think it is telling us that the ways of God's Kingdom are different to the ways of this world. In this story I find an invitation to prioritise God's ways; I find an invitation to connect with God in order to advance his Kingdom and live out our God given calling.

The concept of the Kingdom of God was important for Jewish people in the first century. It represented their hopes for a better life and ideas around the work and function of the Messiah. Primarily they expected that the Messiah who would usher in the Kingdom of God, would liberate them from their oppressors (in their case the Romans), evict them from the country, establish his reign and rule, and in the process restore Israel into the superpower they were in the Golden era when King David reigned supreme.

So when Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God he immediately attracted attention and drew a crowd. But it didn't take the crowd long to be disappointed with his message about the Kingdom, the reason being that he had a very different perspective on the Kingdom of God, one contrary to their hopes and expectations. When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God he spoke of an upside down, inside out kingdom - a kingdom where the first would be last and the last first, servants raised up and earthly kings brought down; a kingdom where all the social, political, national and religious boundaries would be removed, or at least extended.

Jesus talked about a kingdom of inclusion, acceptance, grace and forgiveness. His Kingdom represented a new way, agenda for life and the values of this world. When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God he talked about a great reversal.

In relation to our bible passage we need to look at this story from the macro context of Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom of God. But we also need to view it from the more immediate context of the theme of hospitality shown in the travel narrative between chapters 9-17. From the outset Jesus says that those who follow him must make this journey, the direction he is going, which we know was a journey that would take him to the cross - their priority. Then we have the introduction of the hospitality theme as interpreted through Jesus' Kingdom lens. Jesus sends out 72 with no provisions for the journey and insists they depend on the hospitality of those in towns who welcome them (10:1-11).

Immediately preceding the stop at Martha's home, Jesus tells a story about a man on a journey who is beaten and left to die. He is saved by an unexpected merciful neighbour (10:30-37). This story of "the good Samaritan" highlights Kingdom hospitality, or divine hospitality - love for strangers. Now let's skip over our story and go to the following story in chapter 11. In this story the disciples question Jesus about prayer and in response Jesus tells a story where a person refuses hospitality to a friend in need. In the end hospitality is given, based on the persistence and insistence of the friend who demands that the cultural values be honoured despite the inconvenience of the hour (11:5-8). Whilst the point is persistence in prayer, the theme of hospitality is clearly in play.

Hospitality is a prominent theme throughout Luke's gospel and it would seem on the surface that Jesus' treatment of Martha is at odds with the priority and significance attached to this theme. However, Jesus' explanation represents a radical reversal in relation to societal expectations. The coupling of the story of the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha is particularly interesting.

These accounts are meant to challenge us to think about the social rules our society adheres to and the scripts that we are all supposed to be following. In a first century context, Samaritans were the half-blood enemies to be despised and avoided. Women were not to be disciples, they were not to have an active intellectual life, they were not to interact with men outside of their families and they certainly were not to sit at the feet of a famous rabbi when the dinner needed to be prepared. The Good Samaritan and Mary were not following the scripts society had written for them. And Jesus commends them both by making them the heroes of his stories. The first lesson of the story, then, is that the rules of the Kingdom and the rules of our society are not the same. There is an equality, a justice, a fairness in the Kingdom that does not yet exist in our society.

So Jesus turns the issue of fairness upside down and inside out. Was he being fair to Martha? Well, from a first century context and according to social expectations, absolutely not. But looking at it in the context of the journey metaphor, Kingdom theology and divine hospitality, it becomes clear that Martha is distracted and needed to sort out her priorities. Mary's priorities were clear and she is commended. Martha on the other hand is "worried and upset about many things".

Martha is acting like the would-be disciples we find in chapter 9 who wanted to journey with Jesus but made excuses about not following him immediately. One says 'I will follow you' but wanted to wait for his parents to die, another wanted to follow but wanted to first say goodbye

to friends or maybe even have a farewell party. Jesus was not interested. He basically says to them that if you want to follow me you need to stay focused, move forward, see the big picture and work out your priorities. He has the same message for his disciples when they argue with one another about who will sit at his left or right, or who will be the greatest among them. Jesus urged them not to be distracted by such things.

This is still a major issue for us today as there are plenty of things in life vying for our attention when it comes to the ways of the Kingdom. When it comes to following Jesus, we can be just as distracted as any of the disciples and our priorities can be just as confused.

Martha, wasn't bad, Mary was no better, but on this occasion Mary had gotten her priorities right and Martha was distracted. Mary is commended and Martha corrected. Only one thing is required Jesus says to Martha. The lesson is not just that busy people are too busy and should slow down, or that busy people can get so disoriented that they make bad decisions. The lesson is one of priorities. One thing is needed, and when we get that right, all the other things follow. That one thing is surely God - the centrality of God, the centrality of Jesus in our lives and hearts and the commitment to keep walking in Jesus' direction.

When God is our priority, then quality time with others, and discernment about when to act and when to be still will naturally follow. Martha chose the many parts but Mary chose the one part that is best of all. By setting aside everything else to sit at the master's feet and listen, Mary exemplifies what it means to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

I'm sure the folks who set up the lectionary reading for today would agree with this. The other lessons remind us of the need to set aside time to listen to God through the study of his Word. Amos speaks of the end of the world as a time when God "will send a famine through the land - not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it" (8:11-12). The Apostle Paul, in the lectionary passage of Colossians 1, spoke of the absolute centrality of Christ, through whom and for whom "all things were created," and of our need to continue in the faith, established and firm, not moving from the hope held out in the gospel. In other words, these writers are all saying that to get God right in our lives, we have to put Him first and keep Him there.

To all the busy Marthas in the world (of which I am one!) Jesus has a word for us that was intended to make us stop in our tracks and think: you are upset and frazzled and distracted by many things, but remember, only one thing is needed: seek me as your priority; seek first my Kingdom; love me and you will surely love your neighbour; you will surely walk in my ways.