

The One Needful Thing July 18, 2010

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A friend was telling me about her wedding, back before I was married myself, about how she was so anxious and nervous about all the details that she couldn't remember anything from the actual day – all she had were the pictures. I don't know about you all, but I thought that was pretty sad. Right then and there I decided I would make all possible effort to be aware of things on my own wedding day, so I would have my own memories of it. I mean, it seemed to me like this important day ought to be enjoyed, savored, and remembered. That seemed to me to be the main thing – to have fun and enjoy my wedding day – to be present and awake – to be in it, not wound so tight I'd just be going through the actions frantic with anxiety. Nowadays whenever I do a wedding, this is a story I tell the couple, and urge them to be present at their own wedding and make good memories. Sit and take some deep breaths. Let it all go – it will work out. You planned as best you could - now enjoy your own party. Decide ahead of time that your day won't be ruined if Aunt Mabel has a fit over something or Uncle Bert won't speak to his sister. The main purpose is your wedding.

The other story I tell couples is a quote from Miss Manners - she defines a big family wedding as one that creates fights and feuds for the next 20 years. In other words, know that emotions run high and sometimes things happen. I've seen a veil left at home, a groomsman's pants come in too short, and most notably, a cake's pillars collapsing when the soloist hits a high note.... The main thing is, just remember that it's your wedding day – and BE PRESENT. Of course, I've been thinking of all these things lately as my daughter is planning her own wedding shortly, and she's fretting all the details and calling me almost daily, and I'm trying to be calm for her. So I'm having to take my own advice.

Poor Martha has been much maligned from this brief story from Luke we just read. I was grateful for the scholars and commentators who pointed out that actually, service and hospitality are important aspects of living a Christian life. In fact, the early church created the office of deacons just for the ministries of service – doing the work of caring for the poor and the ill, caring for the widows and orphans, feeding the hungry, and all those very practical types of things which so visibly show our love. Much of the Scriptures exhort us

to do these very things to demonstrate our faith. In fact, in the Colossians passage we read, the apostle Paul wrote that he was a SERVANT – which is the word diakonea – from which we get our English word “deacon” - of the gospel. So we can’t chide Martha just because she was doing the hospitality thing in the kitchen. Not only is that the obligation of a host, it is service to Jesus’ very self, and service to those for whom he died. These physical things are important – taking care of the poor and powerless, the sick and suffering – this was and is a major component of righteous living – you’ll notice that we read the prophet Amos earlier, where he spoke the judgment of God on nations because of unjust economic practices, trampling on the poor. Faith is translated into actions – and very practical ones at that.

Rather, it seems to me that what Jesus is saying to Martha, who in the words of the few verses there in Luke is said to be worried and distracted by many things, is that she’s gotten so wound up in the details that she’s forgotten why she’s doing it in the first place – she’s forgotten the one needful thing – that Jesus is there – that this is for Jesus – that she loves Jesus and longs to serve him. It’s just that at this point, she’s lost her center, her focus; she’s just doing the actions, and growing resentful because of it.

I’ve found that resentment is a big clue that things are out of balance; that I’m doing something I don’t want to do, even if it’s a good deed. When I find myself stewing and resentful, I know I’ve gone beyond what I feel right about. Something’s out of balance. Either I’ve forgotten the “why” of what I’m doing, or I’ve taken on more than my fair share and I know it – and so I feel “put upon” and get grouchy about it. I want to fuss at the other people to come do their share, like Martha does. Really, though, I can only be in charge of what I do, so I need to make some changes. I learned this when we took Billy, my Congolese son, in to live with us. Mr. Bote Tshiek, who was the Congolese liaison in our Presbytery, wanted to see Billy every weekend and have him visit with other Congolese folks. So I dutifully drove Billy over an hour away each weekend to leave him with the Bote-Tshieks, drove the hour home; then did it again the next day to pick him up. After a couple months I began to be resentful of those long trips, and the hours out of each day of my weekend. I muttered to myself that the Bote-Tshieks sure could offer to drive over to my house once in a while. I became quite resentful of the drive, felt I was being taken advantage of, and Billy could tell. Finally it came to me that I could make some changes -

duh! I could remember why I was doing it in the first place - that Billy was a 17 year old kid in a strange country with a strange language and this was important to him; and I could decide how much I wanted to do in that light. I could ask the Bote-Tshieks to drive one of the trips - if I took him over, they could bring him back - otherwise, I decided I would be willing to do it every other week. That solved both my mood and my dilemma. Actually, as Billy got more involved at school, he wanted his weekends back, too, so it turned out good for all of us. The lesson was to listen to the resentment, and use it as a clue that I'd lost my focus and purpose - then be responsible to make my own decisions and changes.

So it's not that Martha, as the "do-er" of the story, chose a lesser part than Mary, the "be-er" of the story, which is the way I've heard it preached before, and which I've resented on behalf of all the folks that practice hospitality at our churches. It's that Martha, for a moment, forgot the reason she was doing her work at all - and her resentment shows that she wanted to be more with Jesus, too, by the way. Jesus challenges her, and us, to remember that one needful thing, and do it.

This is something we all fall prey to at some point - doing things we think we "have" to do and resenting it, having forgotten that "one needful thing" as Jesus calls it. We come to the church building and just go through the motions, or perhaps get upset that others aren't pulling their fair share or something like that. Friends, if it's not being done to the glory of God, if it's not being done out of the love of Christ, if it's not being done out of a felt need of ministry, if we're merely doing things out of habit, or if we are filled with resentment at doing them, then we've forgotten the one needful thing, - - and what we REALLY need to do is recall our focus, and then do what it is that calls us, what it is that moves us, what it is that we WANT to do out of love, gratitude and compassion to God.

Sometimes, things that were done previously and were genuine responses to a need at that time, become things that we do out of habit, long after the need is gone; and it keeps us from responding to the current needs. I remember my mom and the other moms of my home church meeting to roll bandages for the missionaries, and make what were called "cancer pads." If you'll check the needs of mission workers, you won't find those things on their lists any more - in fact, when I checked, I saw other ideas like mosquito nets and bicycle parts. Groups that go on mission trips will often take extra suitcases full of shoes or medicines or other things that the mission workers in that country suggest. The same kind

of thing is true about all kinds of church work – outreach, committees, programs - all can be re-examined in the light of communicating the gospel of Christ to our generation. And especially if we find ourselves feeling put-upon and resentful, like Martha was.

Resentment is a clue – something needs to change. We need to re-examine the one needful thing, the gospel, the purpose of our life; we need to decide whether we need a break, or to do something differently, or just what we can do joyfully for God.

Mary and Martha were both doing the work of God – we all need to listen to God’s words, and we all are called to serve. God calls people with different skills and different passions, and lays differing works on our hearts. And we ourselves might have a different passion somewhere down the line and be called in a new direction. Like in my opening wedding example, we’re in a relationship with God, and our faith grows – and the important thing is to be in it, be present, be aware.

Our prayer today is that we may be aware of that one needful thing, of the love and presence of God in us and with us, so that we may respond with a joy and passion for service that comes from our deepest self to do the work of God. AMEN.