

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 10:38-11:13 "One Thing Is Needed"

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and has passed through Samaria into Judea. In the village of Bethany, just a couple of miles east of Jerusalem, he is welcomed into the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Martha, the elder sister, appears to be the homeowner, is evidently a woman of some wealth and position, and is anxious to provide the kind of hospitality that people of the ancient Near East gave, especially Jews who knew this was a calling of God's people.

1) Service and Discipleship

But Martha's anxiety gets the better of her, and she becomes agitated by all the work to be done in serving Jesus and the Twelve and perhaps others. She could be forgiven, I suppose, for that; but she reveals something less commendable about her inner disposition when she complains to Jesus that Mary is not helping her. "Don't you care?" she asks Jesus, trying to involve him "on her side"!

At issue is not just that Mary is not helping serve the guests, but that she has gone to sit with the men! Mary is "sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to what he says." In other words, she is acting like a disciple! She is breaking all the rules - not taking her expected womanly role of service, acting like one of the men, assuming she is entitled to become a disciple, and liking it! At this point we can be sure that not only Martha is surprised and

disturbed! What does Mary think she is doing?

Of course Jesus reaches precisely the opposite conclusion from the critics! He speaks to Martha, using that fearsome repeated name that in Scripture always tells you that you are in trouble with God: "Moses, Moses..." "Martha, Martha!" Jesus' reading of the situation is that Mary has chosen the better thing, whereas Martha in her distraction and irritation is revealing that her service is not glad and voluntary, but springs from duty and a bad spirit. Martha's language is about "me" - "Don't you care that she has left *me* to do the work... why don't you tell her to help *me*?"

Martha is dealing with self-pity and anger. Like so many of us, she works hard but is "touchy" about it; secretly she wants more recognition, more praise, more help. She is pushed over the line by seeing little sister sitting with the men, while she works in the kitchen! "Well, la-de-da, my sister is going to be Jesus' disciple, while I get to do the dishes..!"

Martha, Martha! Get over it. It's not all about you. Jesus is in your house, and what he has to say is more important than anything. Listen to him while you can! A quick piece of bread and cheese for everyone would be fine; you don't have to impress anyone with a fancy meal so they will think what a good (if

grumpy) hostess you are. Sit and listen to Jesus while he's here! Hearing his word, for the moment, is *"the one thing that is needed."* Does Jesus mean "spirituality" is above "works of service"? No, it's about the priority of hearing the word of God from Jesus' lips.

2) Prayer

So Luke leads us immediately into Jesus' teaching on prayer - the same issue in different words. *The Lord's Prayer*, as we call it, begins with and focuses on the God we are to call Father. He is to be honored, and his rule over us is to be welcomed. His "name" has been dishonored long enough in Israel, but in the "kingdom of God" that Jesus has brought already into being, the Father is to be honored, and the advance of his kingdom is to be prayed for.

So to be a disciple of Jesus means to honor and welcome the reign of his Father. And where God reigns, his will is done - as the parallel (and probably later) version of the Lord's Prayer in *Matthew* adds at this point: *"Father in heaven: hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven."* All these opening phrases of the prayer point us to the commandment to *"Love God with all our heart and mind and strength and will."* This is *"the one thing that is needed": to know and follow the Father's will.*

That is what prayer is about. That is why Jesus prayed, often. Luke says it was while watching Jesus pray that the Twelve asked him to teach them to pray. Does it not strike you as amazing that Jesus prayed? Would you not have thought that his immediate and intuitive understanding of the mind of his Father would tell him what to do at every moment? That it was not so tells us much about his true humanity and how far he "laid aside his glory" to become one of us. But

once we know that Jesus did pray, are we surprised that he did it all the time?

Do we not know in our hearts that we should do that too? That at every moment, in every situation, what we need is to know the will of God for us, which by definition is more knowledgeable, wiser, better, truer in every sense than the best we can come up with - that the will of God is the *right thing* to do in any situation! It is indeed *"the one and only thing"* we need. And the way to access that will is through *prayer*.

At its heart, prayer is never more true to its purpose than when it says "Lord show me your will; enable me to embrace it, and to do it" - simply *"Lord, your will be done."* That was the heart of Jesus' prayer, that was the deciding moment of his ministry in Gethsemane. Perhaps you remember the famous line from C.S. Lewis, that *"In the end there are only two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'your will be done;'"* and those to whom God says *"your will be done."* To those who will not bend their knee to the will of the Father, he eventually says *"have it your own way"* - *"he gives them over,"* to use Biblical language - with all that that implies.

Only when our prayers have led us to submission to God's will, and a desire to advance his purposes in us and in the world, is it then fitting for us to make our requests to our Father. So the Lord's Prayer continues: *"Sustain us this day:"* Father, please give us food and all that is necessary for us. *"Forgive us our sins"* for we indeed need that daily too, and we have to learn from you *"to forgive other people the harm they do us."* Without that we reveal no grace in our hearts, and bring no graciousness to our relationships. And *"keep us from trial, from test, from temptation, and from the work of the evil one"* - in other words, defend us and guide us through this day.

How can we pray such a prayer unless we have first come to know the Father, through Jesus his Son? Only when we have met the gracious, merciful, loving, good God, can we begin to approach him in prayer with boldness and confidence. As children trust their fathers not to harm them but to give them what is good for them, so we must come to know God well enough to trust him.

That proves to be the key that opens every door. The word that locks every door is "why?" - when used in the sense that Martha and all agitated and distressed people utter it: "*Why me?*" "*Why this?*" "*Why now?*" I have said often in the past few years, especially at funerals, that I have found one of the benefits of aging is that the word "why?" is gradually slipping out of my vocabulary. That doesn't mean I have lost all curiosity, or don't care about anything! I still ask "how," but "why" seems increasingly futile. I can't see that we are promised answers in this world, and in the next we probably won't care. I suspect anyway it would be like trying to explain calculus to a 5-year old!

Prayer, then, is about learning to trust God, even when you don't understand him. It is seeking the will and the guidance and the provision of an all-wise and all-powerful and all-loving Father. Prayer is listening, and learning. When we pray for God's will to be revealed, and add our own requests, we learn from his answers. If I pray for the same thing for 12 months, every day, and nothing comes out the way I have requested, then God may be teaching me patience, and that his time is not my time. Or he may be teaching me that I don't really need what I wanted, and it is not his will for me!

So if you want a Beemer for your birthday, by all means pray for it! God knows if it will be good for you! Now and then, he does apparently say "Oh, have it your way," and

we get just what we want, only to discover that can be a big mistake! There is that famous line from Woody Allen (when he was trying to justify his dalliance with Mia Farrow's 20-year old daughter), "*the heart wants what it wants.*" Very true! But thank God we don't always get it!

Prayer is praise to God, submission to God, and only then "*asking, seeking, knocking.*" When we have come over the years to trust that God is good, and that he does know what he is doing, then we can come to him confidently and boldly and expect that we will be shown the way, find what we long for, see doors opening in front of us. Provision and guidance are there for us if we will learn to pray as Jesus did.

"*One thing is needed*": to know, to welcome and to do God's will. Prayer is the key to knowing it, and that requires listening to his words, as well as telling him what we want!

Let us pray...