

**THE ONE THING WE NEED**  
**LUKE 10:38-42; COLOSSIANS 1: 15-28**  
**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**  
**DR. JEANIE STANLEY**  
**JULY 18, 2010**

**Luke 10: 38-42**

*38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

Our second reading comes from Paul's Letter to the Colossians. The first portion of the passage is thought to have been a hymn about Christ that predated the letter. In a way, our passage from Colossians explains why Mary chose the best part by sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to what he said. In Christ all things were created. Jesus holds everything together. Jesus is the one thing we need. Listen to God's Word from **Colossians 1: 15-28**

*15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

*18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him-- provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.*

*I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. 24 I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. 25 I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

Thanks be to God for this Holy Word. Let us pray. Glorious God, we give thanks for your presence in Jesus Christ. We give you thanks for your call to be his disciples, to be his body present in the world today. Forgive us, Lord, when we get distracted from your truth in Christ. Forgive us when our worries keep us from listening to you. Strengthen us by your Spirit so that we choose the one thing we need: Jesus Christ.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What a powerful image of Christ we see in the Letter to the Colossians. In Christ everything was created. In Christ, God became visible. Christ is the head of the Church. Christ holds everything together. In Christ those who were once estranged are reconciled, not only humans but all things, whether on earth or in heaven. All things are reconciled by the blood of his cross. In Christ God has chosen to reveal the mystery of the ages. The mystery is that Christ is in you and in me. It is that Christ who is in us that we proclaim to the world. That is our commission as disciples of Jesus Christ – to proclaim the Good News.

Our passage in Colossians is packed full of theology and Christology, lifting up superlatives about who Christ is and why we proclaim that Christ is the one thing we need. In his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren said it is essential that we know the Christ we proclaim.

McLaren wrote of his own confusion about who Jesus is. Over the years McLaren got to know at least “seven Jesuses.” He first met the “Conservative Protestant Jesus,” whose death on the cross saved him from his sins (Nishioka in *Feasting on the Word*, July 18, 2010, p. 257-258). This Jesus was born to die. As he grew older, McLaren began to believe his understanding of Jesus was too individualistic and legalistic. Is Jesus all about us and our personal salvation?

As a young adult, McLaren met the “Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus,” who was dramatically involved in everyday life through the Holy Spirit. This Jesus was exciting and personal; but McLaren had nagging questions about God’s concern for the whole world, for history, and for creation. .. *through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

Eventually, McLaren met the “Roman Catholic Jesus.” McLaren appreciated the way this Jesus helped him focus on the Eucharist. He was blessed by the ancient traditions that took him beyond his own experience. McLaren was blessed to meet Jesus in communion, yet he continued to be troubled by the way his concept of Jesus seemed to exclude people.

At one point, McLaren worshipped the “Eastern Orthodox Jesus,” that emphasized the Trinity, affirmed mystery, and engaged the world. Next McLaren met the “Liberal Protestant Jesus,” and focused on social justice growing out of a personal experience of faith in Christ. For a time McLaren drew close to the “Anabaptist Jesus,” who emphasized peace and non-violence. Finally, McLaren met the “Liberation Theology Jesus,” who confronted injustice and stood with the poor and the oppressed.

McLaren does not claim the superiority of one understanding of Jesus over another, but he does challenge Christians to know the Jesus they proclaim. Who is the Jesus *we* know and follow? Our reading from Colossians suggests that God in Jesus Christ is more than we can imagine, and certainly more than we can package into a sound bite, a brand or a mission statement.

We learn who Jesus is by listening to him, by spending time with him, and by serving him. Mary was learning who Jesus was as she sat and listened to him. Jesus said she chose the better part, in contrast to Martha who was distracted and worried about many things.

Some people conclude that Jesus was praising contemplation over action, but this is not likely. The passage about Mary and Martha is placed immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus told the lawyer to go and do likewise. The lawyer wanted to argue about scriptural interpretation. He was not listening to Jesus. Like some Christians today, the lawyer was more interested in being right than loving his neighbor.

Many of us empathize with Martha. Thanks to the Marthas in this congregation, we will have coffee and refreshments after worship. Men and women who pay attention to what needs to be done have mowed the grass, made repairs to the building, turned down the air conditioning, and taken care of the myriad of details that are part of being church. Bulletins were designed, printed, and folded. Power-point slides were created and displayed so that we can see, as well as read, when we worship. Attendance and prayer requests will be recorded, and funds deposited. Musicians planned and practiced before offering their gifts this morning to the glory of God. There is a lot of work done so that you and I can sit this morning and listen to Jesus.

In the days in which Jesus lived, there were no refrigerators, frozen dinners or microwaves. I learned about the challenges Martha faced when I spent a year in India after undergraduate school. My roommate and I were assigned to the University of Allahabad. We had no refrigerator. We had a wood burning stove. All water had to be boiled. The food we ate was bought in the market the same day it was served. Meals took hours to produce. The Fulbright program advised us to hire a cook, and we did -a full time cook working seven days a week to feed six adults. A dear friend of mine in Austin says she assembles meals rather than cooking them. There was no assembling for Martha. There was work to be done.

If Jesus wanted dinner, someone had to cook. Martha was doing what was expected of any respectable Jewish woman of her day. It was her duty. Providing a meal was her way to show hospitality and honor her Lord.

Mary, on the other hand, was behaving in a scandalous manner. In those days women were not supposed to sit at the feet of Rabbis and learn from them. Mary should not have been near men other than her father or brother. For Jesus to say that Mary had chosen the best part was a radical notion. Sometimes we forget how radical Jesus was. He turned society's hierarchies upside down. The first were last and the last first.

Women and children joined men in discipleship. Samaritans were heroes. The weak were strong and the poor were rich. The Jesus we meet in Luke was not legalistic or exclusivist, and he was full of surprises.

Jesus did not criticize Martha for working in the kitchen. Jesus loved both Mary and Martha, but Martha became so worried and distracted that she forgot why she was in the kitchen in the first place. Martha wanted to welcome Jesus into her home, but she was not thinking about Jesus when she spoke to him. *“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”* Me, me, me. In her anxiety all Martha thought about was herself. She forgot about the hospitality she wanted to provide, and she forgot about Jesus.

It still happens today. If we are not careful, anxiety and distraction rob us of our relationship with Christ. Like Martha, we become so focused on our work that we forget why we are doing it. We lose sight of Jesus and distort the image of the one we serve in the way we treat others.

John Calvin believed that we can make an idol out of anything, including our work, family, church, even the Bible. What we do for Christ should to reflect the love of Christ. Whether we are listening to the Word or working hard in the kitchen, our discipleship needs to proclaim the Jesus we know and love.

How are we doing as disciples of Christ lately? Have we spent time listening to Jesus or are we too distracted and worried about many things? Who is the Jesus we proclaim by who we are and what we do in our daily lives? There is need of only one thing: do our priorities reflect that?

Please pray with me. O Lord, when we close our eyes, we can almost imagine seeing Jesus inviting us to come and listen to the Good News. We can almost see the Jesus who holds everything together, the Jesus in whom all things were created, and the Jesus who reconciles all things. Lord, we come this morning, just as we are. May we feel the peace of your presence...As we take a deep breath, we confess to you the things that are worrying us right now..... We have been distracted this week... But we are here now...What do you want to tell us? We are listening... O Lord, we thank you for always being there, waiting for us to sit down and listen. You are the one thing we need. Amen.