

## THE ONE THING NEEDED

Luke 10:38-42

Everywhere I go, Fitbits or the equivalent application on cell phones are measuring steps. I was informed at the end of a tiring day in Spain that we had covered 10,000 steps. All I knew was that my feet hurt. My brother while we were in Ireland informed me that we had exceeded 12,000 steps. I could only barely wait to find my bed. Our son-in-law proudly proclaimed that he and our daughter had exceeded 17,000 steps, but only because they got lost in the Wisconsin woods with their two extremely restless children in the stroller. Though I really cannot get I touch with the craze of Fitbits, I understand their value. These step measurements are meant to help us keep on track with our health, encouraging us to keep active and fit.

As I reflected on this passage in Luke, I kept wondering what it would be like to have a spiritual Fitbit? Our spiritual Fitbit would interrupt our busy lives to remind us that we have not spent enough time with our Lord, listening to him, regaining our spiritual centers, making sure that we are following God's call for our lives and not just going our own ways. Maybe a spiritual Fitbit is what Martha needed in our text for today.

The traditional way of interpreting the story of Martha and Mary is to see Martha as a fuss budget who is so wrapped up in serving a meal that she forgets who her guest is. We all know that she should have set her preparations aside and really listened to her Lord. Mary is always seen as the cool and wise person, laid back and letting the meal preparations slide, while sitting at the feet of Jesus and taking in what he is saying. Some could see Martha as productive and a good host and Mary as a slacker, but the Scriptures refer to Martha as "distracted" and Mary as choosing "the better part."

But, as often is the way with the Scriptures, I believe there is more going on in this text than a surface reading would communicate. For one thing, look at its context. This story follows the commissioning of the seventy to go out on their first mission

trips and what follows is the story of the Good Samaritan. The Martha/Mary story could be carrying the message that “works alone are not sufficient,” that we need the spiritual development of allowing God’s word to speak deeply to us and mature us in the faith.

The traditional understanding of this story is that Martha chose to live by expectations that caused her to miss out on the most important moment in her life, the moment when she had the Lord Jesus in her house, but was too busy being the perfect hostess to spend time with him and hear words from him that could change her life. It is not that Mary was any better a person than Martha. It was that Mary’s choice of expectations was the “better” way, the only thing needed. Mary chose to let the house and meal preparations go and sit and listen to Jesus.

And, of course, the message was that the Jewish leaders were doing the same. They were choosing to be focused on expectations of living a perfect life according to the law, while missing the very word of God coming to them in the person of this teacher from Nazareth. It was those same expectations that had the leadership criticize Jesus for doing miracles on the Sabbath, completely missing the wonder of those miracles and celebrating the feedings and healings of people starving, desperately ill, dying, or even dead. Such discussions about the trivia of the law could even get into the details of how much effort could be expended by a faithful Jew to save a drowning person or animal on the Sabbath. It is laughable to us that such nonsense could be taken so seriously, but only because we do not choose to live by those expectations.

There are some biblical scholars, though, who point out that we are reading into this story things that aren’t actually in the text, that we should read the story as it is actually written. According to these scholars, the mention of Martha’s house was a later addition to the text by someone copying this story for others to read. What if Jesus and Martha met on the street and not in her house? There is no mention in the text of a meal and no mention of disciples being present. The “serving” Martha was doing is from the Greek word *diakonia* from which we get the word Deacon.

This word can be translated as “ministry” instead of “serving.” And, saying that Mary “sat at the feet of Jesus” was another way of saying that Mary was a disciple, a follower, just as Martha was as well. These scholars translate this passage this way:

“As they were on their way, Jesus came to a village where a woman named Martha received him. She had a sister called Mary, who also was one who sat at the Lord’s feet, always listening to his words. But Martha was constantly torn apart concerning much ministry. She approached Jesus and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister regularly leaves me to minister alone? Tell her therefore that she may give me a hand.’ But Jesus answered her saying ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and agitated concerning much, but only one thing is needed: For Mary has chosen good and it will not be taken from her.’”

Jesus and Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (their brother) often were together. They were good friends and did dine together, and sometimes with the disciples, as recorded in John 12 after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Mary had wiped Jesus feet with her tears earlier, but at this dinner Mary wiped his feet with costly alabaster, which sent Judas Iscariot into a tirade, saying the alabaster should have been sold and the money given to the poor. So, this family and Jesus shared much with each other, and it is even possible that Mary might have been one of the seventy who had just been sent out to minister to the countryside, while Martha chose to minister in her own town. Martha wanted Jesus to tell Mary to come home and help her with this local ministry which was becoming too much. And Jesus was telling Martha to stop getting overwhelmed, that one thing, and one thing alone, was needed. That one thing appears to be listening to the Lord and doing only what the Lord asks.

A story is told of a man who met the Lord along the road. The Lord asked him to take three stones to a mountaintop in the cart he provided. “Easy peasy,” thought the man. Along the way, he met people who asked him for help, asking that he take

their stones with him. They were too busy, did not have a cart, one excuse after another. And finally the load became too much and he was ready to give up in despair. He blamed the Lord for asking him to do too big of a task, when the Lord appeared to him. The Lord said that he had only asked him to take three stones and began setting the other stones outside the cart. “My yoke is easy, and my burden light,” said the Lord. “I will never ask you to carry more than you can handle.” “I can do that,” the man said, grinning from ear to ear and off he went with his wagon.

Often we do get caught up in our busy lives, that is true, and we need to pause and re-center ourselves. But, it is also true that we busy, action-oriented, mission-minded Christians can take on more than we can bear. These tasks are likely to be good things to do, things that help people, things we have promised people. But, they may not be the things that the Lord is asking us to do. We need our spiritual Fitbits to tell us that it is time for us to quiet ourselves, seek guidance, unburden ourselves before the Lord. It is even possible that what the Lord is asking us to do is less than what we are trying to do.

We do good things in the name of Christ. And we do more and more of them to the point where we get overcommitted and burned out. In the military, this is called “mission creep.” And mission creep is what Martha was experiencing. Mary, on the other hand, was simply doing what the Lord asked her to do. Sometimes we need to step back from our mission tasks, to pause and check to see if these are things that the Lord is calling us to do or have we allowed mission creep to enlarge our task lists.

I once sat through Christmas watching while all my brothers and sisters opened their presents, until finally we got to the big box over in the corner. It was my present, my one and only present. It was a gas powered model airplane. It never left the box in all the years it sat in the basement. It was nice that my parents tried to give me a good gift, but it certainly was not a gift that I wanted or ever could

use. When we give gifts to God in our ministry and service, it might be nice if we ask him what he wants us to do, rather than determining the gift for him.

Marie Kondo has made an industry of getting us to shed the things we don't need in our closet and get our stuff reduced to the needed things. She says that we should hold the object in our hand and ask ourselves if it gives us joy. If it does not, then we should thank it for what it has done for our lives and give it away. We should do the same with our lives. Are we doing what we are called to do? Does what we are doing give us joy? Is what we are doing the thing that the Lord is asking us to do? If not, then we should set some of what we are doing aside, give those tasks to someone else, and thank that task for what that task has done for our lives.

If only we had spiritual Fitbits that would tell us when to stop, when to tune in to our Lord, when to have him focus us and re-center us on the things he wants us to do. In all of her agitation and anxiety over her ministry, Martha needed to quiet herself and set aside the many tasks she was doing to do the one thing needed: listen to her Lord. As our next hymn says it, "Find the quiet center... find the room for hope to enter... clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes, that we can see all the things that really matter."