

The One Necessary Thing
Luke 10.38-42 – Trinity Fellowship, 01-23-22

In one of history's greatest epics of survival, six courageous men navigated a 23 foot lifeboat across 800 miles of the most treacherous seas on the planet in an effort to save themselves and to seek rescue for 22 other men they left behind on a little island off the frozen coast of Antarctica. I'm referring of course to the remarkable 1916 journey of Sir Earnest Shackleton who, along with five crewman from the shipwrecked Endurance, sailed their tiny, fragile craft from Elephant Island to South Georgia island through the turbulent, frigid waters of what was then called the Southern Ocean. To read their story, especially the first hand accounts of the men that experienced it, is to be amazed that this larger than life story is even true and to marvel at the navigational skills it took to cross an open, raging sea under predominantly cloudy skies with nothing but a sextant, a compass and a chronometer -- and then to land your little sailboat on an island so small that to be just a little off in your calculations would almost certainly condemn your crew to death by starvation and exposure, lost in an endless ocean. Frank Worsley was Shackleton's trusted navigator. How did he do it? As the personal accounts of these men testify: Worsley's key focus was on the location of the sun, on those rare occasions when the clouds parted long enough to catch a glimpse of its position. By following the sun, Worsley was able to calculate their position as well as their direction and to predict their arrival at the desired destination with remarkable accuracy. The success of their mission and the lives of 28 men was dependent on one necessary thing: Worsley's ability to find the sun's exact location and to adjust their course accordingly. With no earthly landmarks and none of the 20th century navigational technology that we take so much for granted, the sun was the key to knowing where on earth they were.

This amazing true story has some valuable life lessons for us. The true success of your life and mine is dependent on our ability to find, follow and focus on the Sun of Righteousness. This is the one necessary thing in life. He alone is the Way. He alone is the Truth. He alone brings the healing in His wings that gives us eternal life. In the end our life will be measured by this standard: how well did we follow the Son. When the grey veil curtain of this world is rolled back (to quote Tolkien) no doubt we will be amazed by who receives the greatest rewards and the most impressive commendations. Little children full of faith will far outshine the scientists, philosophers and kings who trusted so much in their own abilities, but had so little faith. Those who were so proud of their cultural and political

contributions will be upstaged by the humble prayer warrior – whose intercession had a greater impact than all their contemporary authors, educators and politicians combined. You see, Jesus is the One True Thing. Your life and mine will be measured by how well we fixed our eyes on Him; how well we maintained an undistracted focus on who He is and what He is saying to us. To dive deep into the human soul is to discover that everyone is clued into this fact. Little children understand it intuitively, though all too often they spend their adult lives trying to alter, mitigate or even deny this basic truth. Jesus made it clear: those who enter the kingdom – those who come to know the God Who designed their soul for a personal relationship with Him, must come with the faith and focus of a little child, not the doubts and distractions of the adults they so often become. A little child shall lead them. As the Psalmist declares: out of the mouths of babes and infants have you ordained strength that You might silence the enemy and the avenger.

Kim Meeder's compelling testimony so vividly illustrates this. Kim is the owner and operator of the Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch in Central Oregon., a non-profit organization that rescues abused and neglected horses and pairs them with disadvantaged children, offering those children a place of safety, peace and hope. When Kim was nine years old she was brought home from school early one day to discover that her father, whom she adored, had murdered her beloved mother and then committed suicide. In her horror and grief she ran frantically out of the house and into a freshly ploughed field, eventually stumbling face first into the dirt. At that moment she was surprised to hear herself crying out to Jesus for help. Up to that point, she had virtually no religious training, having been to church only twice in her life and having no mental idea who Jesus was. She describes the experience as the intuition of the human soul that knows instinctively Who is the one true creator and redeemer. Jesus did indeed come to her rescue in answer to that prayer and she dedicated her life to helping other distressed children find Him as the one true thing in a life of uncertainty, pain, betrayal and frequent tragedy. There are many live versions of her testimony on the internet. I strongly recommend listening to it. She compellingly reminds us that we all have an instinctive grasp of the truth.

The “echoes of eden”, as Jerome Barrs calls it, reverberates through our soul, though, unfortunately we often spend a lifetime trying to drown out those echoes. Even so, you still encounter it in the most prominent fairy tales; you can

hear it in the greatest music; you can recognize the clues in the philosopher's ponderings; the heavens declare it every night and the sun reminds you every day, rising like an Olympic athlete to run its race across the circuit of heaven, leaving no one untouched by its light, its heat and its life-giving impact.

One of the tragedies of a fallen nature in a fallen world is that as we get older, we often trade the truth we know intuitively for the lies the world proffers so effectively. And to believe a lie is to be seduced by the forces of darkness – for Jesus sternly warns us that Satan himself is the father of lies and those who, like the pharisees, persist in believing lies eventually become sons of the devil. How can I avoid this ultimate tragedy? How can I avoid being led astray by the spiritual forces of darkness, the manipulations of a rebellious world, the deceitfulness of my own heart or any other force that might distract me from the one necessary thing? The passage I've chosen for today's meditation provides an insightful answer.

Our key thought for today is this: Being a true disciple of Jesus means choosing what He describes as the one necessary thing: an undistracted focus on Him. With that in mind, let's read our text together:

Luke 10.38-42

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus^[d] entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But Jesus answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary.^[e] Mary has chosen that good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (ESV / NKJV)

Of the four gospel accounts, it is Luke alone that opens the window on Martha and Mary's brief encounter Jesus. It appears to come chronologically after the parable of the good Samaritan and right before Jesus responds to His disciple's request that they teach them how to pray by reminding them of the model prayer He shared in the sermon on the mount (what we call the Lord's prayer) and then following up with the parable of the importunate friend to emphasize the importance of praying without ceasing.

I think we can find in this passage at least three important truths that define what it means to choose the one necessary thing in life. All three focus on Jesus, who is, in fact the one true thing.

First: Welcome His presence

Second: Sit at His feet

Third: Hear His Word

Welcome His Presence. Martha warmly invites and receives Jesus into her house – and by implication, into her life. I believe this indicates the essential first step to knowing Jesus as life’s One True Thing. We must acknowledge who He is and invite Him to come into our life. We recognize Him as the Messiah, if not God in the flesh, and we open our heart’s door to His presence.

Martha’s eagerness to please Jesus is reflected by her anxious busy-ness as she prepares for His visit – what the passage references as “distracted by much serving”. In using the word “distracted”, the text is giving us our first clue that something is lacking in Martha’s approach to knowing Jesus. The Greek word means literally “to draw from around” or “to draw away”. According to Vincent’s New Testament Word studies, the passive voice, as used in this text, conveys the sense of someone being inordinately pre-occupied with something that is not central or most essential.

Let’s pause here and make it personal. What has distracted you from focusing on Jesus? What things are pre-occupying your time and energy to the point that you have very little left for the One True, Necessary thing? Is it something trivial like entertainment – tv shows, movies, video games, perhaps sports? Or is it something that seemingly has greater redeeming value like cleaning the house, serving on a church committee, visiting with friends, helping a neighbor? Good things. But, as the old saying goes, too often the good is the enemy of the best. The good often distracts from the essential. Take driving for instance. Like me, I’m sure many of you have taken the defense driving or drivers ed courses to mitigate the results of a traffic ticket or to lower insurance rates. One of the key truths those courses hope to drill into your memory is the danger of distracted driving. The one essential thing that should occupy your full attention when you’re hurling a 2 ton object at high speeds down a path accommodating people,

buildings and other 2 ton high speed objects is keeping your eyes on the road – with your full attention and your best driving skills. Trying to locate your favorite radio station or spotify playlist or find the last French fry in the fast food bag or retrieving the wrapper that fell on the floor or the cell phone that slide under the seat – is NOT essential to the task at hand. And if it in anyway distracts you – that is, pulls you away from the one necessary thing of safely operating that vehicle – then you are inviting disastrous consequences. And those drivers ed courses spare no gruesome details highlighting the kinds of trouble and tragedy you can create by neglecting that one necessary task when you are the driver. Fiddling with your radio or tape deck used to be at the top of the list of disastrous driving distractions, along with drowsiness or drunkenness. Now the major culprit seems to be the cell phone. In fact, the cell phone itself could easily become one of the most appropriate icons indicating a distracted culture. It makes a frequent appearance in the hands of teenagers who can't seem to get their homework done. Like a thief, it is responsible for stealing precious time and conversation at the family dinner table or at a nice restaurant where couples might otherwise be enjoying a first date or an anniversary.

In Martha's case, she was distracted by the very worthy, seemingly self-less task of serving others – and in this case serving the long awaited Messiah, the King of the Universe; God in the flesh. Most of us would surely give her a pass for being distracted. But Jesus corrects her behavior with a gentle, yet unmistakable rebuke as He clarifies what she should be doing in that moment – and His rebuke reminds us all that even the good – perhaps especially the good – is the enemy of the best. The seemingly most urgent things are often the enemy of the most excellent things.

And before we move on, notice another sinister side effect of misplaced priorities illustrated by Martha's behavior: an anxious unhealthy comparison with others. "Jesus: don't you care that Mary has left me alone to do all the work! Tell her to come help me!" Perhaps there's not a bigger red flag that your thinking is amiss than finding yourself telling the Messiah what He needs to do. Have you found yourself doing this? I confess I have, especially in the past couple years 😊. And I would venture to say that comparing yourself to others, which the Apostle Paul bluntly tells us is not wise, is one of the most common instigators of just such presumptuous conversations. Reminds me of Peter's response when Jesus informed him that he would die a martyr for the faith: he looked at John and said

“and what shall this man do?” Is he going to do his fair share of suffering for the cause? Do I have to bear this task alone? We we’re tempted to compare our situation or ourselves to others, we need to remember Jesus’ reply to Peter: “what is that to you?”. Don’t be let the busy-ness, anxieties and troubles of life, of your jealousy of others, distract you from the one necessary thing you must focus on to live the abundant life: an attentive, intimate relationship with Jesus.

It wasn’t just Martha’s serving that proved to be a distraction, but the fact that she was, as Jesus frankly stated, “anxious and troubled by many things”. We sang about this problem and its remedy just a few minutes. The first verse of *turn your eyes upon Jesus* says: “Oh friend are you weary and troubled – no light in the darkness you see – there’s light for a look at the saviour and life more abundant and free.” One of the reasons I chose to preach this passage today is how shockingly Jesus’ Words to Martha became His Words to me when I was reading the text earlier this week. Too often I have been living with Martha’s mindset, especially recently. How about you? I find myself anxious and troubled about the welfare and spiritual condition of family members; about the dramatic cultural demise of truth, biblical standards, freedom, love, peace, civility, joy; and about the seemingly ineffective ability of the Body of Christ, including our own local body, to combat this demise; about the obvious, looming spiritual darkness casting a chilling shadow over our nation – our world; and then, on a more personal level, the growing limitations of an aging body and mind, not to mention frequently falling short of His holy calling. How about you? What anxious thoughts have been distractions for you lately? What troubles have pre-occupied if not completely side-tracked your time and energy? If any of this hits home, then perhaps the truth of this passage is as much for you as for me.

One of our family’s favorite movies is *Hoosiers*, based on the true story of a small Indiana high school’s miraculous rise to the state basketball championship. One of the players Dad’s was a drunker. The coach tried to help pull him out of his condition by making him an assistant coach and utilize his notable knowledge of basketball to help the team – and his own son. During one of the key games, the father gave in to the pressure and showed up on the court in the middle of the game in a drunken state. You can imagine the profound embarrassment and distraction to his son, a critical player in a must win game. The wise coach looked the boy in the eye and said “focus – focus”. In other words don’t let this very troubling, disturbingly emotional event distract you from the one necessary thing

at hand. With a great deal of discipline, the boy was able to set aside the emotional incident so he could concentrate on finishing the game well..

Satan's strategy is to sabotage your spiritual life by keeping you distracted and disturbed; anxious and troubled; entertained and amused – anything to derail your relationship with God. Life is punctuated with so many hard, disappointing, troubling things clamoring for your attention – its so easy to be distracted from the main thing and to sabotage your goal of finishing well. I would say to you, what I'm having to say so often to myself: stay focused..... On the One Necessary thing. Learn one of Peter's other major life lessons: when the wind and waves blow furiously, don't yield to the temptation to take your eyes off Jesus; don't gaze into the dark menacing clouds or try to contemplate the wind speed or the depths of the sea beneath you; rather: fix your eyes on the One who can calm the sea with the slightest breath of His lips. With a single word. And trust Him – knowing that the same mighty God who nature must obey is the One whose hand will pull you up out of the broiling waves when you start to sink.

In contrast to Martha, Jesus commends Mary's behavior. In this short passage, Mary is our example, showing us how to stay focused on the one necessary thing. Scripture describes her doing two things: sitting at Jesus' feet and hearing His Word.

Sitting at His feet:

Knowing Jesus is more than just inviting Him into your home or heart. Martha did that – but fell short of what Jesus calls “that good part”. As with any relationship, intimacy requires desire and TIME. Desire for God; Time with God. Without a desire for God, your spiritual life will not exist – without Time with God, it will not grow.

David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, the man who God Himself described as “ a man after God's own heart” demonstrated a passionate, single minded focus on the Lord. The Psalms, which is in reality a glimpse at David's prayer journal, provides repeated testimony to his desire for God – and his intimate relationship with the Lord. Psalm 27.4 is one of my favorites:

One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold (gaze upon– ESV) the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire (meditate – NASB) in His temple. (NKJV)

One Thing I desire, he declares, and that’s what I’ll set my mind and heart on seeking. He breaks that 1 desire into three specific parts: to dwell in the house of the Lord; to behold the beauty of the Lord; to inquire in His temple

- To dwell / to live with my Savior – all the days of my life: notice the time implications: I want to live with Him (not just visit Him); and I want to do it ALL the days of my life.
- To behold (gaze) upon the beauty of the Lord – this is a compelling, insightful window into God’s ultimate romantic goals and the ways in which He reveals them; what comes to mind, among other things, is the bridegroom’s description of his beautiful bride on their wedding night in chapter 4 of the Song of Solomon. This requires no exegetical stretching - for from the beginning God made marriage in all its intimacy to reflect the relationship between He and His people which He references both as a Bride and a wife. The inspired text intentionally utilizes the same word to describe this intimacy: for Adam to “know” his wife was a picture; a kind of living romantic metaphor for knowing God. You can see then how this divine relationship is so much more than simply inviting Jesus over for dinner. It calls for your undivided attention.....“an undivided heart”.
- David finishes expressing his desire with the phrase: “And to inquire in His temple”. David desired more than just to adore, worship and enjoy the beauty of God – he desired to seek the knowledge, wisdom and understanding of God, as so indicated by the many such requests throughout his psalmic prayer journal.
- A W Tozer says about David: “Perhaps David’s greatness and his significance for mankind lie in his complete preoccupation with God.” Psalm 16.8 says “I have set the Lord always before me”; Psalm 42.2 says “My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?” “David was acutely God-conscious.” He was also “a God-possessed man”. “He sent his heart to school to the Most High God and soon he knew Him with an immediacy of knowing more wonderful than is dreamed of in our philosophies.” (page 28 – Almighty God devotional)

- David had a heart to love God and to inquire after God. To inquire is to ask and to asking implies listening for an answer – which is a great Segway into our final key to focusing on the one necessary thing: hearing His Word.

Hear His Word:

Mary did one other thing besides sitting in Jesus' presence with adorationshe heard His word. She listened attentively to what He said and took it to heart as the very Word of God. – This is intentional inquiry. David not only desired to gaze upon God's beauty – but to inquire in His temple. Amazingly, Jesus Himself provides us with an example of seeking God in His temple. In what turns out to be the only recorded incident of Jesus' childhood, Luke describes the 12 year old Son of God spending several days engaging the most learned Torah scholars of the day in the Jerusalem temple, a place which He later refers to as a house of prayer. Scripture says He listened, asked questions and even provided some responses of His own that amazed the most celebrated religious leaders of the day. When Mary asked Him what He was doing, He said "I must be about my Father's business". Inquiring in the temple – listening, asking, engaging God in the house of prayer: that's the Father's business; Jesus has given us an example that we should follow in His steps.

Paul proclaims this same passionate desire in Philippians 3.12-14. After dismissing his most impressive accomplishments and spiritual credentials as a loss in exchange for the more excellent prize of knowing Christ, he says this in Phil 3.12-14

¹² Not that I have already attained,^[c] or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. ¹³ Brothers *and sisters*, I do not regard myself as having taken hold of *it yet*; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴ I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (NKJV / NASB)

Notice these active "doing" words and phrases:

- I press on – I earnestly speed on; I pursue; so that I may:

- Lay hold of – seize upon; I take possession of in order to make it my own; to obtain that very thing for which Christ possessed me: He purchased and possessed me for this singular purpose: that I might possess (know) Him in His fulness. To lay hold of or to know Jesus is the reason He redeemed me. This is my life’s purpose – this is the one necessary thing. What helps me lay hold of this? Paul gives us some hints:
- Forgetting the past – including whatever accomplishments I might be tempted to boast about -
- Reaching forward to what’s ahead – stretching forward – ESV: “straining” forward – like a runner straining to cross the finish line and capture first place
- I press on toward the goal – the prize – the upward call of God: found in only one place: Christ Jesus
- This is intentional inquiry – this is serious seeking – this is daily devotion. Would an outside observer ever accuse you of engaging in such a pursuit of God?

Let’s consider some practical helps to assist you in pressing on toward this goal – an undistracted focus on Jesus.

- First: Prioritize a daily time alone with Jesus – as your number one priority. Remember Time is a key ingredient to an intimate relationship. Count no other meeting or task more important than this. How long should this time be? Perhaps you could begin with a single hour – as Jesus asked of the disciples in the garden when He was contemplating the horror of taking up the cross. His admonition: to them was “could you not watch with me one hour?” As you grow and fan the flames of this divine desire, you might consider tithing your waking hours: setting aside a couple hours – surely that’s not too extravagant a goal for the most important pursuit of the day – for the one necessary pursuit of your life.
- Second: Avoid or remove distractions. You want an Undistracted time alone with Him – this is time characterized by quietness; be still and know that I am God, the psalmist says; eliminate anything that interferes with you listening to His Word; pondering what He says; hearing the still small voice of His Spirit, Who wants to well up like an artesian well from deep within your soul. The same Spirit that inspired the written Word, now lives in you as a believer and will help illuminate what He inspired. In fact ask

Him to do just that – as David did in Psalm 119: “show me wondrous things out of your law”. Please note: If your life has been characterized by anxiety, constant distractions, a busy personal, media or social life, it will be a big challenge to sit still and to learn to quiet your soul as well as your body. Like an athlete learning to discipline weak muscles, consistent practice is key. Put away the phone, turn off the screens. Keep on pressing on: It will take a while to re-wire your brain – but there’s nothing more important – because there’s nothing more necessary. As indicated in the book, *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr shows how our modern brain has been wired for distraction and shallow thinking by the media-focused era in which we live. It will take lots of disciplined practice and determination to re-wire it and re-focus it on the one necessary thing.

- Third: It goes without saying that if you’re going to hear the Word, you need to take it with you into your quiet place. The Written Word of Scripture is to you what the Living Word was to Mary. Before Jesus ascended back into heaven, He breathed His Holy Spirit into the life of His disciples and promised them that the Spirit would guide them into all truth and bring to remembrance what He has said to them in person. The Spirit illuminated Word is to you what Jesus’ in person teaching was to Mary or to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, where He began unraveling the Old Testament mysteries and revealed how He was present on every page of every book of the law, the psalms and the prophets.
- Forth: Consider taking some good devotional materials with you into that quiet place. Don’t let them take priority over the Bible, which should be your first and most prominent focus. But recognize that hearing Jesus and understanding His Word is not a lone ranger activity. The Body of Christ is essential. When His physical body left the earth, He left us with a spiritual Body consisting of members, each possessing Spiritual gifts to help ensure that each member could hear a rightly interpreted Word. Listen to Jesus speaking through great men and women of God who are characterized by their close walk with Him. Let their gifts of wisdom, discernment, teaching and prophecy, life lessons and unique perspectives be additional channels of illuminating His Word. Don’t be that eye that says to the foot: I have no need of you.
- Fifth: Pray the Word – in addition to reading it, hearing it, and meditating on it – speak it back to God as your own personal request. God’s Word

communicates His will – by learning to pray it, you will find yourself praying His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Here's a routine I find helpful in my quiet time:

- Begin and end your quiet time by singing songs of worship, particularly praise; enter His gates with thanksgiving and praise; sing songs rich in scriptural content and passionate in expression and continue your gratefulness by specifically acknowledging His blessings, provisions and answered prayers in your life
- Engage His Word in prayer (as we've mentioned); pray the Lord's prayer, Paul's prayers, David's prayers – Ps 119 is a good starting place. There's a reason David's prayer journal made it into the inspired scripture.
- take your pen and journal and pay attention to insights as you read and meditate on the word;

Summary

There are Two kinds of people in the world: those who've invited Jesus into their lives as Martha invited Him into her home. and those who have not: we could categorize them as believers and unbelievers.

Then there are Two kinds of believers (as Mary and Martha illustrate): those who sit at His feet and hear His Word and those who do not – due often to the many distractions of life, even if those distractions involve “much serving” for the Lord. What is your priority: serving or sitting? Serving the Lord or sitting at His feet? He's told you which one is the good part.

A W Tozer – (Page 30):“Our Lord, in defining eternal life, summed up the supreme goal of human existence: “that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.” And Paul revealed the one overpowering interest of his life when he wrote, “that I may know Him.” (Phil 3.10). The business of the Church is God. She is purest when most engaged with God, and she is astray just so far as she follows other interests, no matter how “religious” or humanitarian they may be.” Be careful that serving God doesn't take the place of knowing Him.

Keep your eyes fixed on the Son – and when the stormy weather seems to cloud your vision, be as persistent in seeking Him, as Frank Worsley was in seeking the

physical sun, lest you end up missing life's greatest goal and be lost in an ocean of uncertainty, confusion and death.

When Jesus responded to Martha's request that Mary help her, He called her name twice, as if gently trying to calm her anxious, troubled thinking and focus her attention on Himself. Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things – but only one thing is necessary – choose that good thing. Perhaps you need to put your name in the text in place of Martha's and read this to yourself as Jesus' personal Word to you. Jesus made it clear that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your heart soul mind and strength. Let nothing distract you from that one necessary thing.