

One Thing

i s N e e d f u l

FORMER president Jimmy Carter once said, “We should live our lives as though Christ were coming this afternoon.” On this particular afternoon, Jesus Christ was on his way to Bethany, to the home of some of his best friends on earth: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Jesus had no home. He who created the world had no place to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). The little cottage in Bethany, where Christ was always welcome, became the castle of the King.

Dora Greenwell once defined home as “a world of care without, a world of strife shut out, a world of love shut in.” That seems to describe Mary and Martha’s home in Bethany. They wanted their home to be a haven for the man from Heaven. “Who practices hospitality entertains God himself.” Every Christian should be “given to hospitality” (Romans 12:13, *King James Version*), but today we entertain ourselves in our homes more than we entertain others. Self-indulgence has supplanted Christian hospitality.

The Domestic Diva and the Countess Of Contemplation

Martha “opened her home” to Jesus (Luke 10:38). Martha sent the dinner invitation. Martha made the preparations for the meal Jesus would eat, as she had done on other occasions (John 12:2). Martha was a domestic diva, and a good one. I picture Martha with flour on her nose and Mary with a flower in her hair.

While Martha was in the kitchen creating cuisine for a delicious dinner, Mary positioned herself at the feet of Jesus, drinking in his every word (Luke 10:39). Mary was the countess of contemplation. She was a spiritual seeker (not that Martha was a spiritual slacker). Mary was a student while Martha was a servant. This does not make Mary a hero and Martha a zero. Scripture praises service as much as it does studiousness. A student dives into the Word while a servant dives into the work.

The flash point in this story comes when Martha became “distracted by all the preparations that had to be made” (Luke 10:40). Anyone who has tried to prepare a fine meal for guests can identify and even sympathize with Martha. Her hands were full. She began to worry. “How can I ever get this meal ready by myself? There’s so much to do! I need some help! Where in the world is Mary?” Her frustration spilled over like boiling soup on a hot stove.

Leaving her domain, she confronted not Mary but Jesus! “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” (Luke 10:40). I suppose we could give her a plus for taking her complaint to Jesus, but we would have to give her a minus for questioning his concern. In this she was like the disciples who once questioned Jesus’ concern (Mark 4:38). We are not here to tell Jesus what to do. Jesus is here to tell us what to do.

Jesus spoke to her need of the hour. “Martha, Martha” (Luke 10:41). Jesus answered. The double use of a person’s name was one way Jesus told people he cared about them: “Simon, Simon” (Luke 22:31), and “Saul, Saul” (Acts 9:4).

Jesus knew what was bothering Martha. He told her, “You are worried and upset about many things” (Luke 10:41). The *English Standard Version* translates it “anxious and troubled.” Jesus’ caution to Martha was about anxiety, not serving. Anxiety is practical atheism. My grandmother used to say, “Worry is a rocking chair that never takes you anywhere.” An old African proverb says, “Lord Jesus, make my heart sit down.” Martha needed to stand down. More than that, she needed to sit down. That’s what Mary had chosen to do earlier in the day.

Choosing Well

“If we are ever in doubt about what to do,” said Sir John Lubbock, “it is a good rule to ask ourselves what we shall wish on the morrow that we had done.” Martha was about to learn this lesson. Jesus reduced all her cares and worries faster than the South Beach diet eliminates pounds. He told her, “Only one thing is needed” (Luke 10:42). What? Only one? How can this be? I need many things—or so I think. Jesus knows I need only one thing. I think I had better stick with what Jesus knows!

Are we willing to settle for just one thing? Look at the accumulation of “stuff” in our homes. Abundance keeps us from living the abundant life. Look at our crowded daily schedules. Is there any time simply to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to his Word?

Wise people know only one thing is necessary. David said, “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4). Paul noted, “One thing I do:

Jesus knows I need only one thing.

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13).

The “one thing” Mary chose was superior. Jesus said, “Mary has chosen what is better” (Luke 10:42). It was a better choice because it involved that which is eternal. “It will not be taken away from her.” On my office door is a quote by C. S. Lewis: “All that is not eternal is eternally useless.” Time spent with Jesus is never wasted.

The moral of this story is to choose well. It is a story about a choice that was good (to be hospitable) and one that was better (to be teachable). The *English Standard Version* says, “Mary has chosen the good portion.” Psalm 16:5 (ESV) says, “The Lord is my chosen portion.” This is the choice Mary made. Life is more than loading up on lobster and lasagna.

We make choices every minute of every day. We begin when we wake up. Will we get out of bed, or not? Will we be cheerful, or grouchy? Will we begin the day with prayer, or rush into the activities of the day? Will we ignore Jesus and live by bread alone?

John Oxenham wrote,
To every soul there openeth
A high way and a low;
And every man decideth
Which way his soul shall go.

Evan Esar said, “You can’t do anything about the length of your life, but you can do something about its width and depth.” Worrying and fretting will not lengthen your life—in fact, it will probably shorten it. But we can do something about the spiritual width and depth of our lives.

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The Bible says we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). We are urged to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16). The believers in Berea were praised because they searched the Scriptures every day (Acts 17:11). We can—and we must—make this Mary-like choice. Today we have many opportunities to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to his Word. Here is a short list for starters: Sunday school, the preaching hour, small group studies, men’s and women’s Bible studies, youth and college age Bible studies, Christian conventions, Bible conferences, Christian college lectureships, family camps, youth camps, gospel meetings, Vacation Bible School, and of course individual Bible study time. Choose wisely.

One note: we can’t sit at the feet of Jesus forever. While it is wonderful to feast upon spiritual things and drink in his words, there comes a time when we must get up and walk in his footsteps, doing what he wants us to do. James said it well: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22).

Life is full of choices. Mary made the right choice. What’s your choice? George MacDonald wrote,
One day there came along that silent shore,
While I my net was casting in the sea,
A Man who spoke as never man before,
I followed him; new life began in me.
Mine was the boat, but his the voice,
And his the call, yet mine the choice. ■

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