

## 2-28 One Thing Right Acts 10:1-4; 23b-26; Luke 10:38-42

I was never the star basketball player I wanted to be. When on the team in Middle School, I wanted to play every position on the court. I guess my coach knew that because he kept moving me around on the bench so I could see the game really well.

I was accustomed to pick up games at the local park which was all about improvisation: "I have the ball and I'm going to dribble around until I get to shoot." But coach didn't like that approach and wanted us to learn a few simple plays. You can't do complicated plays on a team where people's voices are changing.

I was playing guard one practice and my job on the play we were learning was to pass the ball from the wing back out to another guard coming off a screen at the top of the key. But that guard was having trouble with his timing and my defender was all in my face, so I executed a middle school drive toward the basket and then kicked the ball out to my target except there was a defensive player between us so it didn't turn out so well.

When I did things like that, Coach would holler at me: *Massey, you can't play by the seat of your pants on this team. When we're running this play, I need for you to do one thing; just one thing. Do you know what that one thing is? Make the pass? Good answer. Now will you do that for me; will you do that one thing right?*

There are times in life when we need to do one thing. **Cornelius** had that figured out.. He was a very disciplined and powerful military leader. According to our text in Acts 10 Cornelius was a centurion; commonly believed to lead 100 Roman soldiers. In actuality a *centuriea* was typically 80 or more soldiers UP TO 100.

Cornelius must have done this job pretty well, but there was one thing he wanted even more. **V. 2** of Acts 10 states that *He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.*

Cornelius the Gentile god-fearer was so devout that God sent an angel to him who said: *Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.* And God honored the devotion of Cornelius by sending Simon Peter to share even better news to his entire family.

What a contrast when we move to the story of **Martha** in Luke 10 and we're grateful to Scripture and Stage for introducing Martha and Mary. Martha, it seems, was caught on that **hamster wheel of life**; she kept trying to keep more **spinning plates in the air**. Mary had discovered how to do one thing right; Martha was a person who tried to do everything right.

I have some questions about this family of three siblings (we meet **Lazarus** the brother in John's gospel). Did they live alone or were there other family members? **V. 38** says that Martha welcomed Jesus into *HER* home, a likely reference to Martha as the eldest of the three. She sure fits the classic traits of an oldest sibling. She was a driven **high achiever: bossy and a rule follower**. She wants to **please adults** so she is very **responsible**. I call this complex, "marthaplexy."

While Martha was running around in a fluster, Mary was able to do "only one thing." But what was the one thing? Was it sitting at the feet of Jesus? Was it listening to him? Was it being devoted to him? Was it an internal stillness and openness?

I suspect that Mary was the **youngest** child? You know how they are. She was **unresponsive** to Martha; she was **off in her own world**; and we all know **less is expected of the youngest** in the family, just ask the Prodigal Son's older brother.

That would leave **Lazarus** as the **middle child** which of course is the position of being **overlooked and feeling insecure**. Middle children must work hard to **get attention** from others.

You have to admit, there's no better way to get attention and draw a crowd than dying and being raised from the dead. Lazarus was in hog heaven after that...signing autographs and the like.

We get a similar glimpse of Mary and Martha in **John's gospel**. When Martha got word that Jesus was coming to Bethany after Lazarus had died, she immediately ran down the road to meet him while Mary "**stayed at home.**" After Martha's encounter with Jesus, she went back to the house and told Mary privately what Jesus had said and that he was "**calling for her.**" So Mary got up and went to meet Jesus and *fell at his feet*.

Here again we see Martha the hard charger and Mary the one who waits. In both these stories Mary is the one found at Jesus' feet.

Let's return to a phrase about Mary in **Luke 10:39**. *Martha had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.*

The phrase, *sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying* would communicate one thing to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews in Palestine. It would mean that Mary was a disciple of Jesus. Only a disciple would sit at the feet of a Master. Jesus commended not only Mary, but her discipleship.

By contrast, Jesus said to Martha, *you are worried and distracted by many things*; didn't you listen when I did that sermon about not being anxious about anything? Remember, the birds of the air and lilies of the fields? Worried and distracted...isn't that the parenting motto today?

Some have seen in this story a general call to a simple lifestyle that is **not anxious about anything**. Richard Foster and Ron Sider would be modern proponents of a simple lifestyle. Earlier voices like Francois Fenelon or Thomas a' Kempis were of like mind as were all of the monastics. There is a time for work, but *the better part*, as Jesus called it here, is the life of spiritual reflection and devotion. I know it seems out of our reach, but is it really?

The Daily Telegraph recently reported that a 47 year old Austrian tycoon, **Karl Rabeder**, is liquidating his 5 million dollar fortune including his villa overlooking the Swiss Alps. He said, *My idea is to have nothing left. Absolutely nothing.* Rabeder and his wife will move into a simple hut surviving on \$1,300 a month.

Why? This is what he said: *For a long time, I believed that more wealth and luxury automatically meant more happiness. But over time...I heard the words 'stop what you are doing now—all this consumerism—and start your real life'*

The turning point happened on a three-week trip to Hawaii with his wife. *It was the biggest shock of my life when I realized how horrible, soulless and without feeling the 5 star lifestyle is. In those three weeks, we spent all the money you could possibly spend. But in all that time, we hadn't meant a single real person. The staff played the role of being friendly and the guests played the role of being important and nobody was real.*

I don't know if this man's faith had anything to do with this dramatic change, but it looks like a spiritual transformation. As I read the article, I thought about the rich young ruler who had fulfilled all the law. But Jesus said to the man: *one more thing is required of you...go sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor.* Maybe it wasn't the money. Maybe it was the focus.

John's gospel also presents the story of big ruckus over Jesus healing a blind man. This man was taken to testify before the Pharisees who didn't believe Jesus had healed him. Mainly, they wanted to put a lid on this man's testimony. After a lengthy and crazy trial of sorts where the man was grilled on what happened, the Pharisees made one last attempt to get the healed man to recant his story. In exasperation, the man said, **Look, I don't know if he's a sinner or not; but one thing I do know; once I was blind but now I see.**

All these stories are about coming to a place of clarity in your life. In each case, a person comes to a place where they state or exemplify the bedrock of their faith; where they place their ultimate trust.

It is this core conviction that Paul expresses in Philippians: ***this one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead.*** It's like Paul's personal mission statement. His life could be summed up as leaving his former ways of zeal for keeping the law in order to press forward toward his divine calling to reach the Gentiles with the gospel.

What Jesus called the *one thing* or the *better part* in this story is **about getting to this clarity** about life.

Often, it takes a crisis to bring clarity to life's purpose, such as the last week of my mother's life. My dad was in denial about her looming death and all the theology I had in my brain dissipated like a puff of smoke in the wind. Mom was on morphine, but when she was awake I would read to her or let her tell stories. Somewhere in the midst of those moments, I would ask, Can I get you anything? She would usually say "no thank you," but would occasionally ask for water or another blanket.

On the day before she died, when I asked if she needed something, she said *yes, I do. What? That blue dress in the closet* she said. Not understanding, I went to the closet and saw a blue dress; pulled it out and asked, *is this it?* *Yes* she said, *that's the one.* I was just about to ask her why she wanted her blue dress when it suddenly dawned on me. She was picking out the dress she wanted to wear at her funeral. It was the one decision she had left to make.

But I can tell you that experience moved me to greater clarity. I knew my calling was to help people live for and serve Christ, but on that day, I realized there was another focus. I needed to assist people to do the one thing that would prepare them for their dying day.

Pray for that clarity my brothers and sisters; the clarity of Mary; of Cornelius; of Paul, so you can find the one thing that anchors your faith.