

“Finding the One Thing Needed”

July 17, 2022

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42

Does anyone remember a movie called “City Slickers?” It came out in 1991, which makes me feel pretty old to think that was over 30 years ago. It starred Billy Crystal, Daniel Stern and Bruno Kirby who played three friends approaching middle age who go out west for a vacation together to be part of a cattle drive. Billy Crystal’s character is going through a mid-life crisis, questioning his commitments to work and family. On the drive they meet a grizzled, old cow hand named Curly, played by Jack Palance. Crystal’s character spends quite a bit of time with Curly and is struck by how content and serene he seems to be with his work and his life. So, he asks him how he does it. “What’s your secret; what’s the meaning of life?” Curly holds up his finger and says, “The meaning of life is one thing.” “Ok...what? What is it? What’s the one thing?” Curly tells him, “You have to figure that out for yourself.”

It’s a wonderful sort of moment of Zen in an otherwise pretty forgettable movie. That answer is reminiscent of Jesus’ response to Martha when she asks him to have her sister Mary help with the work. Interpreters over the years have portrayed this as a rebuke of Martha from Jesus. He seems to be choosing Mary over her. But I’m not convinced it’s that simple. We so often want to look at the world as a binary choice; it’s one or the other. If we choose Mary’s way then we reject Martha’s, or the other way around. We can’t possibly value both at once. But is Martha really doing anything wrong? She’s preparing a meal for a guest, surely that’s worthwhile.

In fact, it’s more than worthwhile; it’s essential. The story of Abraham serving his guests is sort of a model of hospitality and a deeply spiritual activity. This story is the basis for the celebration of Abraham’s Table that’s held every year during Ramadan by the Islamic Society of the Niagara Frontier at the Masjid An-Noor on Heim Road. The Table welcomes all the Abrahamic faiths, Jews, Christians and Muslims, at three of its corners and people of all other faiths at the fourth corner. It’s a beautiful celebration of multicultural and interfaith values. In Abraham’s case, when he sees strangers approaching he wastes no time running to greet them and then hustling around to be sure everything is prepared properly and completely. He prepares a feast large enough for an army to feed his guests, an overflowing, lavish display of hospitality and care.

For Abraham the one thing needed is the enthusiastic welcome to strangers, to provide them sustenance and rest. He doesn’t question where they’re from or ask them what they want with him, he just pours himself into providing hospitality. It’s true, of course, in that part of the world at that time, and even today, hospitality to strangers is a cultural mandate. In a nomadic society where settlements were few and far between it was a life saving act to open your home to people on the road in need of food and water. Anything Abraham gave would have been welcomed. But he’s not just going through the motions; he’s not just fulfilling an obligation.

When Abraham opens his home, he opens his heart; he gives far beyond what's needed from the depth of his generosity. He's found the one thing needed.

Abraham is the epitome of hospitality, an ideal we can only aspire to. Martha is more like us. She knows what's expected of her, what society requires, and she's happy to do it, but a little put out that she has to do it alone. Is she looking for appreciation or praise? Maybe she would have liked that. I think she's also looking for a little fairness. There's nothing wrong with that. The problem seems to be in her imposing her values on her sister. Jesus tells her she's "worried and distracted by many things;" she's fragmented and frenzied. She's lost the singleness of mind and unity of purpose that gives meaning to her work. So, there's nothing wrong with the work itself but with her state of mind in doing it.

Our options aren't limited to either work or contemplation. Both are important, both are essential to making us whole. But if we engage in either out of bitterness or resentment; if we spend our time trying to convince others to be more like us, we'll always be incomplete. Jesus isn't rebuking Martha, he's inviting her. He's inviting her to find wholeness in the same unity of purpose through her work as Mary has through her contemplation.

In her book *Practical Mysticism*, the great spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as the "art of union with Reality," with a capital R. The operative word there is "union." What does it mean to unite with something and what happens to us when we do? Underhill writes, "Wisdom is the fruit of communion; ignorance the inevitable portion of those who 'keep themselves to themselves,' and stand apart judging, analyzing the things they have never truly known." That's what Martha is doing as she sees Mary sitting next to Jesus, listening and learning from him. She doesn't understand what Mary is doing and she doesn't fully appreciate what she herself is doing. She stands outside her actions, judging herself as well as her sister.

We fall into that trap all the time. We're constantly comparing ourselves to those around us, judging them, judging ourselves. We resist pouring ourselves into what we're doing, finding fulfillment in our actions. Instead we live alienated from ourselves, conflicted and empty. The better part Mary has found is to be immersed in one thing, to find wholeness in the Divine Presence whether through contemplative prayer or active engagement. The one thing needed, no matter what we're doing in the moment, is to be fully present in each moment.

It's what some call mindfulness. Another term for it is to be awake. Paul talks about becoming one with the risen Christ. He says at one point, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." He's given himself over, become united with Christ. And in him Christ is fully present. The epistle reading for today is from Colossians and includes the words, "Christ himself is before all things and in him all things hold together." In the presence of Christ we find wholeness so that whatever we do, our action or contemplation, is a form of prayer; all of it becomes sacred.

People like Abraham and Mary are able to live that way instinctively; it's just how they're wired. You may know some others like that. You may know people who always seem to be content, always serene and accepting not just of difficult circumstances but even of difficult people. But most of us have to work at it. Most of us are like Martha and need to be reminded when we're going off the beam, when we're too enmeshed in our own needs, wrapped up in our egos. Finding the one thing needed, being fully present in each moment, is a discipline to be cultivated and practiced. It also requires some self-awareness, knowing our shortcomings and being gentle with ourselves when we fail.

We're not called to be Christ, but to be open to Christ. We're not expected to be Abraham or Mary, or even Martha for that matter. We're invited to be our full, true selves. We're invited to give up judging ourselves and comparing ourselves and to let go of our egos that drive us to exasperation and despair. We're invited to live in union with God, to be fully present with the visitor at our door, to let Christ in and share all that we have to give.

Amen