

"ONE THING IS NEEDFUL"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 28, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

Someone has penned the following lines which help to describe the time in which we live,

"This is the age of the half-read page;
The quick hash and the mad dash.
This is the age of the bright night
with the nerves tight;
And the plane hop with a brief stop.

This is the age of the lamp tan in a short span.
The brain strain and the heart pain;
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is done."

It sounds a bit on the cynical side of things, but there's a lot of truth in it. There was an article in the magazine Psychology Today that caught my eye. It had this to say,

"In the next twelve months, we will consume around 20,000 tons of aspirin...that totals 225 tablets per person, per year, or 2/3rd of a tablet per person, per day. If you go by these sales figures alone, it would suggest that most everyone in the United States has a headache most of the time."

DEVELOPMENT

Now I don't know if this generation is any more "uptight" or anxious than the last one, but a statement made by a seminar leader not too long ago bears thinking about. And the statement was this,

"Twenty years ago people were asking, 'How can I get to heaven?' And today people are asking more than ever, 'How can I get through this day?'"

I confess that statement made an impact on me because...

"That's what I've been hearing...
And that's what I've been seeing....
And that's what I've been feeling on the inside!"

Back in the early days of this century, the top ten killers of humankind in the United States were all infectious diseases. In the 1980s it was estimated that the top ten killers of humankind were all stress-related diseases. The medical profession and changed economic conditions and child protection laws have all worked to reduce substantially the death rate. Meanwhile, our lives have gotten more and more complicated.

We're such busy people. And many of you, I know, are under pressure at work or perhaps at school. Some of you may be under stress because of a shaky marriage or problems with kids, and some deal with stress better than others.

BLUEBIRD TROUBLES

Dr. John Anderson tells about a cartoon that appeared sometime back in the New Yorker magazine.

Approaching a small bridge that was plainly marked, "Load Limit - 8 Tons" was a truck, also marked on its side, "8 tons". When this 8 ton truck was about in the middle of this bridge with the 8 ton limit, a bluebird lighted on the top girder. And at that point the bridge gave way and crashed with the truck into the river below, to the obvious surprise of the bluebird.

This bridge was built as indicated for only 8 tons. The truck weighed exactly 8 tons. The bridge could hold up under its load limit, but not under 8 tons and one bluebird.

The story, of course, is somewhat wonderfully ridiculous. Most bridges could stand up under their load limit and several thousand bluebirds extra. But - to be sure - all bridges do have a breaking point somewhere...that point at which the bluebird would be just too much. But, friends, it really isn't the bluebird that breaks it down. It's the fact that 8 tons are already present.

Many of us - if not most of us - have "bluebird troubles". We're all burdened by the facts of our lives which load us to the point of "load limit". We let little things get the best of us...little bluebirds of nothingness... tiny bluebirds of no importance, but just the thing to bring us down. Every person has a limit and we would do well to watch for the warning signs of one bluebird too many. There is always something of a load limit.

Obviously, we are not the first generation of people in the history of humankind who are under pressure, anxiety and stress. There were people...up-tight and anxious 'way back there in the time of Jesus. In fact, our Gospel text, is reminding us that Jesus told a good friend by the name of Martha to slow down a bit and to "smell the flowers" along the way, so to speak.

JESUS COMES TO BETHANY

Remember the scene. Jesus was coming to Bethany to visit Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha.

Great news! Get things in order. Martha didn't hesitate for one moment to begin the preparations. A thorough house cleaning. And no doubt some baking and cooking of those foods that she knew Jesus would enjoy. She was hard at work.

Jesus probably arrived early. Don't you hate it when people arrive early. Here you are...busy in the kitchen making the salad and thinking about those last minute preparations. You're still in your work clothes giving the floor a last minute vacuuming...and the doorbell rings, the buzzer sounds. Oh, my gosh. The first guest has arrived. Darn...I thought I had enough time to jump into the shower and change my clothes. So much for those other plans. You say to yourself, "I knew I should have started earlier..."

Whether Jesus arrived early or not, suffice it is to say that there were more things to be done. Martha was working feverishly and Mary was, too, but when Jesus arrived at the front door, all of Mary's feverish activity stops as she invites Him in and sits down to chat with Him.

Meanwhile, out in the kitchen, Martha is finishing up the meal...huffing and puffing and rattling the dishes and saying to herself,

"When is my sister going to get in here and help me finish up this work?"

The pots and the pans and slamming doors are getting louder and more noticeable. That doesn't seem to bring a response and so, finally, Martha can't stand it anymore and bursts into the living room, hands on her hips, face flushed with anger and bursts forth with these words addressed to Jesus,

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me!"

I picture Jesus responding with a loving smile as He says to her,

"Martha, Martha...you are anxious and troubled about many things. One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

And can't you sympathize with Martha here? Shocked. Embarrassed. What was she supposed to do...let the casserole burn in the oven?

Now, if we didn't know the rest of the story, we might assume that Martha had quite a shallow faith and that Mary had all the spiritual depth, but not so! Hold on. Recall when Lazarus died? They had sent for Jesus several days prior to his death and when He finally comes, Martha hurries to Him while Mary stays at home. She says to Jesus,

"If you had been here...my brother would not have died!"

No recrimination. Just simple trust at work. And she goes on, "I know that God will give You whatever You ask of Him!" Notice that Martha did not say, "I hope" or "I think", but she said, "I know". In spite of her sorrow, she exclaims,

"I believe that YOU are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world!"

WHAT A CONFESSION OF FAITH

What a confession of faith! Really. This woman who once was flustered by some last minute preparations has now become one of the first to recognize and one of the first to proclaim who Jesus really is. "I believe that You are the Messiah". Martha's faux pas was not lack of spirituality. It was a matter of timing, a matter of perspective.

Remember those moving and beautiful lines in the third chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes where we hear the rhythmic cadence of the writer who says,

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every-matter under heaven..."

- A time to be born and a time to die.
- A time to break down and a time to build up.
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Yes, there is a time for everything. The tough part is keeping it all in perspective.

How do you achieve the kind of wisdom that avoids "making mountains out of mole hills and mole hills out of mountains".

Have you ever been in a hurry and buttoned up a long overcoat with lots of buttons and when you were done, found out that the coat was uneven? What went wrong? I'll tell you what went wrong. When you don't get the first button in the right hole, all the rest are out of sequence too, right? My friend, that's a parable of life. Jesus said it this way in the Sermon on the Mount,

"Seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness,
and all these things shall be yours as well."

(Matthew 6: 33)

If the Lord is not the high priority in your life, then, like the overcoat, so many other things in life will be out of whack as well. I believe it. First things first and the other things will slip in to place without any trouble.

One wonders...is it true perhaps that people today aren't asking as fervently as in the past, "How can I get to heaven?" Is it true - and I'm inclined to think it is - that people seem to be asking, "How can I make it through this day?" Who really knows for sure. Ultimately, it really doesn't make that much difference...not when you come right down to it.

Even though the questions are different, they are "co-dependent" in a startling way! For the closer we get to Jesus, the more He will have a positive effect on our lives...on our "day to day" faith walk each day. And in the long run that will have us headed toward Heaven.

Let me close with this prayer because...because it seems to me to capture the themes of both questions:

"O Lord, help me to remember that nothing is going to happen today...that You and I together cannot handle."

LET US PRAY

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* the books that I like to take off with me to the mountains and the seashore in the summertime is Anne Morrow Lindberg's Gift From the Sea..... read it many times and find its message helps me with me "summer renewal".

PASTORAL PRAYER: June 28, 1992

Lord, we resist being reminded of our condition...

But deep down we know that we keep falling short of our good intentions.

Even though we have heard many times that love is the answer to our problems, we keep slipping back into those little ruts of selfishness.

Even though we know it is best to live one day at a time, we keep worrying about tomorrow and what it may bring to us.

Even though we know it is better to listen when others speak, we keep falling back into the posture of defensiveness and striking back with words.

Lord, this is why we come to Church and here bare our souls and confess our needs and sins to You.

We need to be reminded that in mercy You reach down and help us to get back on our feet.

We need to be assured that what we have done is forgiven because You never give up on any of us...no matter what.

We need to affirm our faith in You and in each other.

We need to have our hopes of an abundant life reinforced through Your word.

Come among us, Lord, in our worship. Speak to us in these moments. Minister to our individual needs.

If we need to be challenged, come and upset those comfortable ways we have chosen.

If we need to be healed where we hurt, come gently and restore to us a healthy mind and and wholesome spirit.

Then, Lord, turn us around. Turn us out to minister to the needs of others, even as You minister to us through others.

Enable us to be unafraid in confronting sinful ways and to challenge comfortable and selfish patterns.

Help us to change what can be changed.

Teach us how to deal gently with those around us who are hurting in body, mind or spirit.

Then, surround us with Your spirit,
surprise us with your joy.
Strengthen us in Your word,
Send us forth from here with Your great love.

In the spirit of Christ, we pray.