

"ONE THING IS NEEDFUL"

INTRODUCTION

There is a familiar scene in the tenth chapter of Luke's Gospel which helps to set the stage for the things that we're going to be thinking about together here for a few moments this morning. The scene centers around a visit that Jesus once made to the home of Mary and Martha, two sisters, who lived in the little town of Bethany not far from the city of Jerusalem.

Martha appears to be running the household, for Luke tells us that Martha went out and welcomed Jesus "into her home". Martha's sister, Mary, is seen sitting quietly at the foot of Jesus listening to what he had to say. Meanwhile, Martha is busy in the kitchen, tending to the elaborate preparations involved in entertaining this man from Nazareth. Our sympathy goes out to Martha as we see her burst into the room where Mary and Jesus are talking and in a rather excited voice, she says,

"Lord, do you not care that my sister Mary has left me alone to serve. Tell her to get up and come and help me".

And Jesus answers her, saying:

"Martha...Martha...you are worried and anxious about so many things. Only one thing is important. One thing is needful. Your sister Mary has chosen the most important thing and you must not tear her away from it".

It has been said of Mary from that day to this that she had the capacity to distinguish the important from the unimportant. She had the ability to single out the essential, and you and I know from our experiences that this ability to single out the essential becomes ever more important as life itself becomes ever more complex. With most of us, it's not a question of "what must I do?" - but rather it is a question of "what must I do first?" And when we settle this question of what is to receive priority in our lives, we are on the way to settling many of our own problems and finding some real peace of mind.

William Butler Yeats once defined genius "as the art of living the major issues of life". It is true, is it not, that leadership in any area of life involves this ability to distinguish the main point from the side issues and then to drive to the very heart of the matter!

"One thing is needful" said Jesus, "And Mary has chosen the good portion". She had an eye for the vital. She was sensitive to the essential. I think we're dealing with something here this morning that touches all of our lives and we would do well to pause momentarily and put ourselves under the judgement of this little scene that took place long ago. The Man from Nazareth helped Mary to see what was essential, and we know too that when we confront Him, we find that there is something about Him that calls us back to the central issues of life.

IN OUR INDIVIDUAL LIVES

In the first place, He helps us to come to a better understanding of ourselves - of our weaknesses, our tendencies. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said something like this:

"Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light"

The King James' Version puts it: "If thine eye be single, thy whole body is full of light". In other words, he is reminding us of the importance of singleness of

eye. Perhaps part of our trouble is that we see too much. We try to see too many things all at the same time. I suppose we're like the preacher of whom the Bishop of the church was once led to remark rather facetiously, "Brother So and So is certainly a hard worker. Why he's busy serving three different parishes - and all at the same time - the one where he use to be, the one where he is now, and the one where he'd like to be!"

There are times when our vision is darkened and confused by these side glances. We look over the fence to see whether others are faring better than ourselves and thus our minds become clouded with the shadows of envy. Or we look to the side to see if our rivals are passing us and then we stumble around, losing heart and valuable time. But when the Christ spirit comes into our lives and really takes hold, when we confront Him, then we are set free from all side glances which only confuse us with comparisons and confound us with jealousies. He gives to us a singleness of eye which in turn gives to us a singleness of aim. When we try to keep up with Jesus, we somehow stop worrying about keeping up with the Joneses. It was Paul who said:

"One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

And while we speak of Christ giving us the power to see what is vital, we ought to consider, too, what he means by being vital. There is a tendency on all our parts to confuse vitality with vehement action. A person may rush noisily around and yet have very little vitality. On the other hand, a person may have lots of vitality and keep still. Martha was active with her pots and pans and the kitchen preparations. Mary sat quietly listening to what Jesus was saying. But the difference in activity was not a measure of their vitality.

Remember when we use to make use of the phrase or expression, "he's a live wire". It was deemed high praise when used to describe some one. I know of a person who is called a "live wire" because he is always rushing in and out of meetings, dabbling in a dozen or so different things. But his so-called vitality is a sort of St. Vitus dance. Ralph Sockman reminds us in one of his books that the liveness of a wire is not measured by its sputter and sparking. Live wires are safe and most effective when they are well insulated and silent. The measure of a live wire is how strong a current it carries. Mary sat quietly connecting her mind with the mind of Christ. ~~She was carrying his life giving current.~~ Mary had an eye for the vital. She was vital.

IN OUR SOCIAL AND CIVIC LIFE

Not only does the Man from Nazareth help us to see what is vital in our own lives, but he also reminds us of what is vital and important in the area of our social and civic life.

Some years ago, Sinclair Lewis, in one of his books pictured an American traveler returning from Europe. He showed him standing on the balcony at the Grand Central Station before going home to his home in the mid-west. As this American stood there looking down at the crowds of people moving from ticket-window to train gate, we're told that it reminded him of a giant ant-hill whose motivating principle seemed to be "going somewhere, going quickly, and going often". The people in the station seemed dwarfed into insect-like smallness. And the question came to his mind: "Why is it that these individuals look so small and ~~petty~~ while the worshippers I saw in the great cathedrals of Europe did not seem so dwarfed?" And he arrived at the conclusion with which we agree, that

insignificant

there is something about men at worship which gives them a stature and a significance not given by mere motion in a crowd.

The Biblical view of life reminds us that man is made for something more than merely "going somewhere, going quickly, and going often". Psalm 8 reminds us "that thou hast made man a little lower than the angels and hast crowned him with glory and honor". It is well for us to ask, where are we going? Why are we going. We need to be reminded from time to time that mere busyness is not progress.....that all change is not necessarily for the good.....that mere employment is not prosperity.....that mere production of goods is not going to produce goodness. We see evidences of it all around us.

Like Martha, we can lost sight of the important and our perspective can get all out of whack. We can so easily get caught up in the rat-race to make money and to strive for success and a place in the sun. So often it seems to be every man for himself - take as much as you can get and don't worry about anyone else but number one!

There's an old legend that comes to mind that has been associated with the name of Saint Martin. It seems that Saint Martin in one of his journeys caught up with two fellow travelers, one of whom was a greedy, crotchety, covetous man, and the other of whom was a jealous, envious man. When it came time for Saint Martin to depart from their company, he told them he would grant them a parting wish. It was this: whichever of the two would make a wish first would have his wish fulfilled, and the other would get exactly double what the first had wished for.

Well, the two men were stumped. The greedy man wanted his wish, but he also wanted the double portion. The envious man desired the wish, but he could not stand the thought of the other man getting twice as much as he himself would have. Therefore, neither was willing to make a wish. Finally the greedy man seized the other man by the throat and threatened to choke him to death unless he made a wish. Whereupon the envious man, in order to escape being choked said with a wry smile, "All right, I'll make a wish. I ask to be made blind in my left eye". And at that he lost the sight of his eye, and the other man went blind in both eyes".

This old legend all too tragically depicts the greed and the rivalry which beset society. Out of fear and jealousy, we hurt ourselves to spite others. In all of this selfish and striving mad scramble on the part of people and nations, who is going to tell us what the true values and the real priorities of life are? Let us not go on like Martha, more concerned about the material things of life than the spirit side of life. But let us sit down at the foot of our Lord and learn from Him what is truly essential. Let us strive to keep the channels open between and among peoples in the belief that it is better to talk than to fight each other. But over and above and beyond all of the conferences of men, let us privately and publicly confer with God until we comprehend and apply his great principle of priority which is:

"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness"

IN OUR OWN RELIGIOUS LIFE

Not only does Christ have something to say to us regarding that which is vital in our individual lives, in our social and civic life, but he also points up to us the essential thing in our religious life. Religion can become cluttered with a lot of non-

essentials. This simple Gospel of Jesus has grown down through 20 centuries of time into a vast ecclesiastical system with creeds, ceremonies, organizations and officials that sometimes blind Him from our view. It is well to consider what the absolute necessities are without which the church cannot live.

One good way of discerning the essential in the faith is to consider what the missionaries find most effective in making converts in non-Christian lands. I heard a distinguished missionary speak some time back and as I listened to him, I realized that he was giving the message which he had been using as the plow-point to break the soil of a non-Christian culture. What was his text? He went right back to Jesus' answer when He was asked by the lawyer, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" Remember that at this time there were over six hundred different laws on the law books in the Temple in Jerusalem. And Jesus cut through so much of the non-essential religious tradition of his day when he responded:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your sould, with all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first and great commandment and the second is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets".

CLOSING I remember as a student travelling to Palestine. One memory of that wonderful two weeks in the Holy Land was a visit to the little house in Bethany where, according to tradition, these two sisters - Martha and Mary, and their brother Lazarus lived. I recall that as I stood by the door of that little home, I thought of what Jesus had said to Martha. My mind was flooded with that New Testament scene. "You are anxious about many things. One things is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion".

As I stood there meditating upon those words with two or three American friends, the silence was broken by the voice of a man who suddenly appeared from within the house. Dressed in the garb of an Arab and looking at the four Americans standing there, he said, "Post cards, post cards....you Americans buy picture post card of house of Mary and Martha.". We smiled at each other, and I'm sure that the same thought ran through all of our mind....how typical....of ourselves, yes, and of our time, and how often we lose sight of the truly important - the essential, the vital. I appreciate picture post cards, but that was the wrong moment for it.

Renewing her spiritual

And while Martha was distracted by her pots and pans and preparations for vitality. entertainment, Mary sat quietly listening to what Jesus had to say. I wonder what it was that he said to Mary. We do not know. But we do know this, that too many of us are inclined to be more like Martha than Mary - and that in our noisy, rushing and troubled world, and yes, even our busy churches - we would do better to listen to our Lord and read of his word until we learn what is really vital!

PRAYER Open our eyes, Our Father, so that we may come to see better than we do that which is truly mportant. And then give us strong hearts and willing hearts to set our minds so that we may pursue that which is essential, so that our lives may be transformed and transöforming life all around us. Amen