

"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 this morning. This 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 great city of Jerusalem.

Martha appears to be running the household, for Luke tells us that Martha went out and welcome 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 is 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, on the way, shall we say, to 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 able to see the essential. I don't know how you feel about this, but it seems to me that we are 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. Our Lord helped Mary to see what was essential, and we know too that wne 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, and or our own weaknesses and tendencies. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said something like this: Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light" Or as 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. I think 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 was once led to remark rather facetiously "Brother So and So is certainly a hard worker. Why he's 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 fences 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 and lose heart. But when Christ comes into our lives, when we confront Him, then we are set free from all of these side glances which only confuse us with comparisons, 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. We turn our backs on the worries of yesterday and proceed on the principle of the Apostle Paul who once 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 what he means by being vital. Unfortunately, vitality is frequently confused 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. Mary sat quietly listening to what Jesus was saying. But the difference in activity was not a measure of their vitality.

We deem it high praise to say of a person, he's a "live wire". 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. We're reminded too 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 to the vital. She was vital.

IN OUR SOCIAL AND CIVIC LIFE

Not only does the Master 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 this conclusion with which we agree, that there is something about men at worship which gives them a significance not given by mere motion in a crowd....

Man is made for something more than merely "going somewhere, going quickly, and going often". It is well for us to ask, where are we going? Why are we going? It is well, I think, for us to be aware of the fact that mere busyness is not progress.....that mere employment is not prosperity....that mere production of goods is not goodness.....

Like Martha, you and I are anxious about so many material things in life. But like Mary, we need to sit down and learn what is vitally needed. It's been fifteen years since the war ended, and we've nearly forgotten how the government took over the nation's economy and declared certain things to be priorities. Remember how the government put steel and sugar and other commodities on the priority list. But who tells us what the priorities are in peace time? It's each fellow for himself....take as much as you can....and don't worry about the person behind you...

This attitude of individuals and nations brings to mind an old legend 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, covetous man, and the other of whom was a jealous, envious person. When it came time for Saint Martin to leave them, 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. 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 fellow went blind in both eyes."

This old legend all too tragically depicts the greed and rivalry which bedevil our world. In fear and jealousy, we hurt ourselves to spite others. How is this cut-throat competition to be curbed. In all of this selfish materialism who is going to set our gaze on what is vital. Who is going to tell us what the true priorities are? Let us not go on like Martha, anxious and busy about material things. But let us sit down at the foot of our Lord and learn from him what is essential. Let us continue to keep the channels between nations open in the belief that it is better to talk together than it is 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