

“What’s the One Thing That We Need?”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of
St. Andrew’s United Church
(and Joint Service with St. Mark’s and with St. Peter’s)
for Sunday, July 17th, 2016
Scripture Readings: Psalm 15 (VU 736)
Luke 10:38-42
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It is summer – temperatures rise, the pace for many slows down, and we need not worry about deep and difficult issues of the faith.

It has been said that the two parables that frame the essence of the Christian message are the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of the Prodigal Son (or Forgiving Father as some would shape it). Don’t need them in summer (oh, I forgot, many read the Good Samaritan Story last week in their churches).

Now these are significant, life-shaping stories. They speak about forgiveness and acceptance, reaching out to the needs of another, putting someone else ahead of ourselves. From a modern perspective, I see their importance and timeless value, though I am concerned in 2016 that we do not have a story featuring women.

Well, we can say that was the culture of the day.

But wait – we have a story about women today – and I will suggest to you that it is a story that should make the “big three” of stories. Not a parable, it is an aphorism about Jesus’ life and engagement with two women. And I think he has underlined the essence of life, personal planning, and even congregational visioning exercises.

But wait – I am ahead of myself. Let’s look at the story itself.

It is only 5 verses. Jesus visits a sister household of Mary and Martha. Martha busies herself with the social reception and food preparations while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to his teachings and insights. Martha is a little miffed – she has done a lot of work without much help, and says so.

Jesus, far from sensitive to Martha’s concern, basically says that Mary has made the right choice in this dilemma.

What does Jesus mean by this? He has somehow offended all of the people – men and women – who are into serving others, helping out at events, dinners, social events. It is not wise to upset those who do the work of the church in a variety of ways.

Over thirty years ago I learned that lesson very forcefully. The church in which I was serving had an annual “dessert and cards” evening as a fundraiser for the couples club. It was advertised for a couple of weeks in the bulletin, and people clearly were looking forward to a relaxed, social evening.

To my surprise the president of the club came to me after church a few days before the event was to be held and asked if I had any objections to playing cards in the basement of the church.

Now I came from a family where the only thing you could do on Sunday was play cards and board games (no hockey or baseball in season on a Sunday in our family) so I found the question a bit strange. Rather than answer the question directly, I thought I would change the topic to basic principles. "This is an adult group with all kinds of very active church people who understand the basic tenets of the faith. Why, I assumed you are responsible people and can make a decision as to what you see as an appropriate program option."

"Yes," came the reply, "but if you had some objections or concerns we would need to consider that."

Not one to shy away from an issue, I replied: "I find it interesting that you were concerned about my views on playing cards. The truth is I have no concern about playing cards, but I think serving rich desserts – cakes and pies – is far more worrisome for the health and well-being of the participants."

Like I say – do not offend those who serve and meet the food needs of others, especially when you are speaking to a former baking queen of the local agricultural society.

So surely Jesus knew enough not to offend someone who was being hospitable, meeting the needs of both he and Mary, and giving her full commitment to serve in the process.

Some of us six weeks ago attended a spiritual gifts workshop conducted by Ed Kruse, where we learned that each one of us has spiritual gifts to share, and they are different. And the worse thing is to expect people to function in areas where they are not comfortable.

We have gifts, and should be attuned to them and aware of them in planning what we will do. And we need the gifts of those who can serve and care for others in a simple, direct, caring way.

I always liked the story of Mary and Martha because when I am on my A-game, I am the person who can sit and talk endlessly about a variety of issues – politics, sports, weather, tourism, philosophy – you name it, and I can be in.

But the story is not about that. The story is a reminder that whoever we are, and whatever we do, we should do it with a clear sense of the values and purposes that we hold clearly in our lives.

Jesus did not say talking and musing is better than feeding others and showing hospitality; he simply revealed that we need to be clear about our purpose and understanding of life before we determine what we want to do and how we want to do it.

I have worked with a couple of congregations in northern Ontario this spring through EDGE, a United Church organization that helps congregations with their vision and purpose for the future. In both cases there was a strong desire to get onto some action – new

programs, new community initiatives and activities, finding a new minister. They saw my role, initially, as helping them find the right things to do.

But first I suggested they needed to explore what is their purpose as a congregation, and what values do they want to display and share in their programs.

Simply put: “Who are you?” and “Why are you here?”

Once we can answer those questions, we have a sense as to what we should do and be about.

So Jesus, let me assure the bakers, servers, hospitable people of the congregation, did not say that talking is better than working or helping others. He did not say that, nor would he even think it.

But he was clear, I believe, in reminding us that the “better way” is to understand the faith, our purposes as a people of God, our understanding of what the world needs, then go out and do what is needed.

The call of Jesus the Christ is not to be busy or even frenetic in our actions; the call of Jesus is to be faithful. That is the one thing that we need.

Being reminded of that is never a bad thing.