

The Bottom Button

Proper 11, Year C – Luke 10:38-42

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, July 21, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Can't you just imagine the scene? Jesus and the gang are on their way up to Jerusalem and stop by Bethany to pay a visit on their good friends, Lazarus, Mary and Martha. A nice cozy dinner is planned, just the family, Jesus, and at *least* a dozen of his followers. There's a lot of work to be done and there's Martha, back in the kitchen. There's Martha, sweat falling from her forehead. There's Martha, with flour all over her apron. There's Martha, worrying about whether the casseroles would run over into the fire, making sure the lamb didn't burn on the grill, trying to keep all the pots stirred. There's Martha, wondering just how many disciples came in with Jesus, and just how much they would all eat.

Meanwhile, dear sister Mary is hanging around with Jesus and the guys in the parlor, listening to the latest tales from the journey, the latest reports of miracles, the latest stories illustrating the Kingdom of God. And the longer it goes on that way, the later the evening wears on, the closer the time gets to having to have the supper on the table, the closer Martha comes to her *own* boiling point. Maybe she bangs the pots and the pans around in the kitchen a little louder than she needs to. Maybe she slams cabinet doors that don't even need opening. Maybe she goes to the doorway and [*sigh*] sighs heavily, or [*ahem*] clears her throat in *that* sort of way, thinking that *someone* will notice, hoping that *someone* will come and help her, wishing that someone, *anyone*, would at least *care*.

Finally, Martha is steamed. both figuratively and *literally*, She comes storming out of the kitchen, and, past the point of even *speaking* to her sister, she directs her pent-up anger at the guest of honor, "Don't you *care* that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself, Jesus? Tell her to get up off her first-century backside and come help me get this food on the table!"

And it makes perfect sense. Most of us can feel for Martha. Hers is certainly not an unfair request. She and her sister are *both* Jesus's friends. She and her sister are both his disciples. She and her sister are both his *hosts*. And here's Martha, left holding the bag. We know what she's talking about. We can all relate to being in a situation where we have had to take up the slack because someone else didn't do his or her fair share. So even though we've heard the story so many times, when Jesus responds, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by so *many* things, but there is need of only *one* thing," maybe we're still a bit... put off, because we know very well what an unpleasant evening it would have been if the likes of Peter, James and John had just gone hungry. Her work was important. Her attention to the needs of others was important. Her *service* was *important*.

The problem was that Martha had lost her focus. "You are worried and distracted by so many things," Jesus told her, "but there is need of only *one* thing." In the hustle and bustle and, eventually, the *frustration* of her service, Martha had allowed herself to be distracted from the better part – her focus on the Guest of Honor.

If the truth be told, we are all pretty much a bunch of Marthas, living in a Martha world, in a Martha day and age. I read a report some time ago that said that Americans go through enough aspirin in a year so that each person would have to take something like 450 tablets. And that doesn't even count the Advil and Tylenol. We are a society of movers and shakers, a society where *doing* is the overwhelmingly dominant occupation. Having been raised on what has been called the "Protestant work ethic," we believe that real fulfillment can only be found by being "fully productive," by doing everything that needs to be done – and then just a bit more, by piling up things done, and covering up things left undone. For many of us there are only two speeds in life: full steam ahead, and passed-out exhausted. We go, and we go, and we go, until we finally collapse – and then we get up the next morning and do it all again. At the office, at home, even here inside these doors, we are constantly looking for the next thing to do, the next task to accomplish, the next item to put on our list so we can put a little check next to it when it's done.

We think that with all our hyper-activity, we can somehow get ahead of the game. We think that with all our bustling about, we can somehow get a leg up on the rest of the world. We think that with all our kinetic motion, we can somehow propel ourselves to a better state. Though we would never say it out loud, deep down, I'm convinced that we think that if we can *do* enough, we can somehow get out from under this *grace* thing, and earn even our salvation.

But the old saying holds true, "The faster we go, the behinder we get." With all our activity, with all our bustling about, with all our busy-ness, we don't get salvation, we don't get a better or more fulfilling life, we don't even ever get *done*. All we end up getting... is exhausted.

Our problem is that, like Martha, in our busy-ness, we so often loose focus on the one thing that really matters, the one thing that is really important, the "only one thing" that Jesus told Martha she needed.

Earlier this week, with this morning's Gospel lesson already running around in my head, I got one of those tip-offs that I've told you before God throws in my way just when I need it. This past Tuesday turned out to be an unexpectedly busy day. With Vestry meeting and Saints, Sinners and Cynics, I finished the day in the same basic black uniform I wore to have breakfast with the Wardens. In between, though, I had an errand to run that called for a more casual costume and I pulled into my drive, jumped from my truck almost before it quit rolling, ran through the door, threw off my clericals, pulled on my jeans, and grabbed a fresh shirt from the closet. I finished buttoning my shirt and tucked it into my pants, but something didn't feel quite right. It's a relatively new shirt, so I thought maybe the odd way it seemed to feel was just my hurried imagination. But when I got to the bathroom mirror to run a brush through what little hair I have left, I *saw* the problem. In my busy, distracted haste, I had put the buttons in the wrong holes, so that the left side of the shirt was a full notch higher than the right. I laughed out loud as I saw myself in the mirror sporting a pronounced starboard list. As I unbuttoned the shirt to start over from the bottom button, up, I could almost hear my Mom telling my four-year-old self, "If you don't put that *first* button in the right place, everything else is going to be out of place, too."

That's a tough lesson to remember. There are all sorts of concerns in our lives which demand our attention, and our devotion, and sometimes even our passion. Just as someone had to make sure the disciples got fed, so our lives are filled with many important things. Our work is *important*. Our attention to the needs of others is *important*. Our service is *important*. But however good and noble and praiseworthy these things are, they do *not*, they should *not*, they *must* not demand our unconditional devotion or our ultimate passion. There are many things in life that are important. But all of the important actions and duties, all of the good things we do, all of the service we perform, must be rooted and grounded and nourished in our personal relationship with *the* Guest of Honor.

Without that one thing, all our frenetic work, all our frantic running after our needs or even the needs of others, all our self-serving service, is worth nothing more than the needless rattling of pots and pans, the useless slamming of doors that don't need to be closed, and the pathetic sound [*sigh*] of *wasted* sighs.

The bottom button is to live every part of our lives with Jesus Christ in his proper place. The first thing is to turn our attention to the Guest of Honor. *That* is the better part that Jesus said will *never* be taken away.