

## “The One Single Thing I Need”

Rev. David Gregory

July 17, 2022

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost



### Readings

Luke 10:38-42

from the New Revised Standard Version

Now as they went on their way, (Jesus) entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me.” But Jesus answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

“Mindful”

a poem by Mary Oliver *from Why I Wake Early*

Every day I see or hear something that more or less  
kills me with delight that leaves me like a needle  
In the haystack of light. It is what I was born for—to look, to listen,  
to lose myself inside this soft world—to instruct myself over and over  
in joy, and acclamation.

Nor am I talking about the exceptional,  
the fearful, the dreadful, the very extravagant—but of the ordinary,  
the common, the very drab, the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,  
I say to myself, how can you help  
but grow wise with such teachings as these,  
the untrimmable light of the world,  
the ocean’s shine, the prayers that are made out of grass?

It isn't our fault that we are so easily distracted these days. Perhaps a better word is "overwhelmed." We live within an information explosion. We face the stubbornness of a global pandemic. The climate crisis worsens while the political will to do anything about it evaporates. Our democracy hangs in the balance with a tendency toward theocracy. We brace ourselves for the next mass shooting. The easiest thing in the world is to become paralyzed by our anxieties. I want to be light-hearted. I want a Sunday to come along where I just talk about happy things, tell some jokes, and laugh until it hurts.

Last evening several of us spent some time at Marin Joe's listening and singing along with a duo called Hanson and DeTurk. I was seated next to Lois, and at one point I leaned over to her and said, "Look at us, having fun!" When do we just set everything aside any more, and have a little fun? Why does life always have to be so doggone serious? We've been trained by current events to consider large chunks of our human experience too frivolous, too silly, too inconsequential to have any bearing on a life that confronts us every day with things that we desperately want to change, things that we do not seem able to do anything about.

I remember a time not too long ago when the concept of "spiritual practice" seemed pretty cool. We thought of it as a supplement to our theological underpinnings, our views of reality informed by what we think we know about God. My own journey toward spiritual practice began with prayer, then moved toward meditation, and from there it became more diverse, more inclusive, more broadly energetic. It included yoga, breathwork, walking, hiking, deep listening, contemplative dialogue, music, art, and poetry. And after last evening, I might add frivolity and fun to the list.

Think back to when you were a child, and fun was a way of life. We were provided with PLAY-grounds and PLAY-mates. If we annoyed our moms, they told us to go out and PLAY. Summer breaks from school meant extra PLAY time. As we got older, we took on responsibilities of work and home and family, and—especially in America—we became so obsessed with success that we lost our natural ability to play, and found ways to work at it instead.

In terms of spiritual practice, something's been happening with me over the last decade or so. What used to feel like the "extra things," the enhancements to my theological journey, have instead *become* the journey. I've become less inclined to describe things, and more inclined to experience them. And as it turns out, these experiences are the exact things that have prepared me for what the world around me has become. Instead of being nice things to do, they have become my lifeline, or my life preserver. I don't meditate because it's a cool thing to do. I meditate so that I can function as a human being in a grounded way. I pray so that I can experience wholeness. I walk so that I can connect with Mother Earth in ways that reassure me and help me to feel safe. I gather in proximity with others, both digitally and physically, to experience the power and wisdom that I can only find in community. And after last evening, I laugh so that the news I read in the paper doesn't get the best of me.

Let's think about this tale of two sisters, Martha and Mary. They are such a familiar pair by now. We speak of them often. They show up again and again in Jesus's closest circle along with their brother Lazarus who was a beloved friend of Jesus. This account in Luke seems like one of their earliest appearances, and it's a story with a simple point. Jesus was in their home for dinner, and after dinner,

Mary sat on the ground at Jesus's feet, and hung on his every word. She listened deeply. She found her focus and kept it sharply there. To her sister Martha, it looked like lollygagging. First of all, what is a woman doing listening to the men after dinner? And there was work to be done. And Martha was doing this work all alone, without any help. Let's just say to Martha's credit that the dishes do indeed need to get done ... sometime ... eventually. Perhaps the point Jesus is making is that whatever it is that Martha is doing can be done a little later. There's something more compelling, more important going on than what we might call the mundane matters of life. Yes, the work needs to get done, but can't the moment include something other than work? Could the work not become an end in itself, but something that happens like washing your face or taking out the trash on your way to enjoying the company of others?

I could have been at home tackling a sink full of dishes last night instead of sitting around a piano, singing? Yes, I could have. But instead, I participated in the spiritual practice of fun, and you might say that I chose "the better part" of things, at least in those moments. I stopped the incessant narrative in my soul that says I'm not being productive, and I looked at the faces of people enjoying themselves and each other, and for that time period I felt like I was breathing once again.

We don't go into meditation to ignore the world that is. We don't spend time praying so that we can change the world. We pray because it changes US, and the energy we gain from prayer enables us to change the world. Jesus told Martha in front of everyone to stop this anxious ride she was on. Stop. Martha, stop. You're worried about forty-two things. There's really only one thing, and your sister Mary gets it. It's not that Mary is a better person or more virtuous, it's just that Mary has mastered the art of focusing on one thing that is important in this present moment.

In today's language we call what Mary was doing "mindfulness," and it's that practice that enabled Mary Oliver to wake up early every day and to see or hear something that would kill her with delight. Maybe she wrote a poem about cleaning her house; I just haven't found it yet. She was born to look, to listen, to lose herself inside this soft world—to instruct herself over and over in joy, and acclamation. Even this modern Mary seems to have chosen what Jesus called the "better part," enabling her to be instructed by a blade of grass, a singing bird, or a cool breeze.

So although we may think that the world will come to an end if we don't keep track of it all, the real change that is needed is for us to lay it all down, to put down the awfulness of the newscast, focus on the buzzing of a hummingbird, and allow our own vibration to rise and match it. Then we can approach the news of the day with an energy that can actually make a difference in it.

It is always important to remember that there is nothing new under the sun. Yes, we live in difficult but not unprecedented times. Jesus lived in a world that was dominated by a religious system aligned with a violent empire. He and his people knew economic injustice, hunger, and bigotry. Things were not right with the world, and they felt powerless to change it. Jesus let Martha know what the wise choice was. And to me, it seems he's letting us know it too.