

July 21 2013

## Scripture Lessons Genesis 18:1-10a

Luke 10: 38-42

### Sermon *Choosing the Good Portion*

Well as Don DeChenne shared with us, "Martha, Martha you are anxious and troubled about many things. One thing is needful, Mary has chosen the good part or portion according to this translation, should not be taken away from her." Jesus' description of Martha could, I think, be the description of each one of us because in many ways we are anxious and troubled about many things in the world around us. As our culture becomes a lot more complex as there are more and more things to do, and places to be and more activities to engage in, we become anxious and troubled about many, many things. And added to this economy which is not as it could be for many of us and the burden can become almost unbearable as we live our daily lives. In the midst of all of this, though, we seek ways to structure our time in ways to get the most out of it. In the old times we had day timers, now we have Smartphone, and ipods and laptops and beepers and buzzers all kinds of things going off to remind us. There are all kinds of technology, all kinds of ways to seek to control our time or perhaps to get even more done in a shorter amount of time.

David Henry Thoreau noticed the same phenomena amongst the people of Concord, Massachusetts of his own time. In his book, *Walden* he recorded these impressions and I chuckle at some of what he had to say. He sat back and he said, "I see young men, I see my own townsmen whose misfortune it is to inherit a farm, a house, a barn, cattle, farming tools but these are more easily acquired than to get rid of. It would have been better to have been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called the labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat of their 60 acres when man is only condemned to eat his own peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their grave as soon as they are born? They have got to live a man's life pushing all these things before them and get on as well as they can. How many poor mortal souls have I met that are well nigh crushed and smothered under the load creeping down the road of life pushing before them a barn 75 by 40 feet Augean stables never cleaned and 100 acres of land of tillage, mowing and pasturing and woodlot. On the other hand, there are those who struggle with no such unnecessary inheritance unencumbered find just as much labor and subdue and cultivate just this few cubic feet of flesh."

Priority, priorities are what this passage from Thoreau and much more importantly this passage from the story of Mary and Martha are all about. What is really important is of secondary importance in the story. Martha in the story chooses one way and Mary chooses another. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to meet his destiny when he stops on the way at the home of his friends Martha and Mary. Martha makes great preparations for their honored guest even though the roles are really reversed because Jesus truly comes to play host to each of them. He comes to see them with what we would call the bread of life, with words which will give them strength.

Martha, as you know, bustles around while Mary sits near Jesus - just listening. Martha is miffed and she goes to Jesus for support but Jesus draws her back and gently rebukes her with a word which is the text for this sermon. And the point I think is made Jesus could have done with just a glass of wine and a piece of bread as well as a seven course meal that day. Martha worried about the wrong kinds of things.

How familiar all these things sounds to us. How often we are troubled and worried about things which many are not really important and then we fail to engage with the really important things of life. Pastor friends tell of spending a day with a family of a child that has just died young and then that evening in a meeting that lasted two hours spent time arguing over where a new church sign would be placed on the church property. How much insight and spiritual energy is invested in concerns, what I think, on things of marginal value in the least.

The late Paul Tillich, said years ago in a sermon titled, The New Being. There are numerable concerns in our lives which demand attention and devotion but they do not demand infinite attention, and they do not demand ultimate passion. They are important but not ultimately important. Martha's priority was mixed up. She missed out on what was really important for what was not quite as important. We do the same thing as individuals and as churches. For people like us who take pride of how hard we work and how long the hours and how much time we take without a vacation this is a really hard story for us to hear. Martha is the model. Mary is the one who is impractical and in a task orientated culture, the church, too can fall prey to the temptation of measuring everything by how busy we are. How many meetings we attend. How many programs we begin as a church. How many committees, how many activities we take part in.

All of these things in themselves are in fact important maybe even very interesting as we lives we live. We make the mistake when we assume the true life in Jesus can be measured by our sense of busyness. Bible scholar James Bright writes it this way, that the twenty first century church seems to be come in a thousand different paths but really no destiny- food shelves- day care centers abound. There is no lack for volunteer groups for us to belong to but Sunday worship attendance is steadily declining and even for the most committed of us is a there is a lack of study and mediation on the word of God.

Work and Faith go hand and hand. And Faith needs understanding. When faith is cut off from steady and meaningful encounter with Jesus, the Word and the worship, the work load generates into meaningless routine. So for you and for me and for the entire church it is not a false choice between contemplative life and the active life; between prayer and meditation on one hand and service toward the world on the other hand rather it is an understanding. It is an understanding that the source for our action is the fellowship, is the friendship, is the closeness that we have to the one we call the living Word of God Jesus, Jesus, calls us to sit at his feet, to sit at his feet as Mary did so many years ago. And together we say Amen.