

**LUKE 10:38–42.** (EHV)

As they went on their way, Jesus came into a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who was sitting at the Lord's feet and was listening to his word. But Martha was distracted with all her serving. She came over and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." The Lord answered and told her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is needed. In fact, Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Chores, tasks, assignments—call them what you will. Have you ever been in a situation where there were a bunch of them to go around? Perhaps regularly, even daily? If so, what was the best one? If you grow up on a farm, there might be morning chores, and you might hope to be assigned egg gathering or sweeping the kitchen floor rather than mucking out the stalls or weeding two rows in the garden. Or if your teacher assigns a paper and there is a limited list of topics to choose from, and every topic can only be selected once, maybe your hand shoots up right away so that you can pick the topic you think is the easiest. I used to work as a yardman in a bridge construction yard, and by far the best assignment was running errands with the pickup. We affectionately called those trips gravy runs. Driving somewhere to pick up or drop off an item, especially if it was to a faraway job site, was so much easier than the regular demanding work of loading and unloading trailers.

In today's Gospel, Jesus commends Mary for choosing "that better part." Literally in Greek it's just "the good part" or "the good portion." It's kind of difficult to determine what exactly Jesus means by that phrase. I think it probably represents the fact that before Jesus arrived at Mary and Martha's house, Mary and Martha talked about hosting him and what needed to be done, and they accordingly divided up the work into different parts, different tasks, different assignments. And the situation makes for a unique lesson, because we learn that doing right isn't just a matter of avoiding what's sinful and doing the opposite of it. Doing right is also a matter of choosing **the best assignment** or task from a lot of good and right ones.

Jesus has arrived at the village of Bethany, a village not far east of Jerusalem. Since Jesus spent most of his ministry up in Galilee, and Jerusalem was quite a ways south of Galilee, there really only seems to be one reason that Jesus would be staying in Bethany. There must have been a major festival coming up that required all the adult Jewish males to go to the temple in Jerusalem. There were three such festivals—the Passover, the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. So Jesus is most likely on his way to attend one of these festivals, and he stays with his good friends Mary and Martha.

We aren't told a lot about Mary and Martha, but we're told more about them than we are some others in the Bible. John tells us, as I already noted, that they lived in the village of Bethany. We also know they had a brother, Lazarus, who was also from Bethany, and whom Jesus would later raise from the dead. Even though it isn't said explicitly, we get every impression that Martha and Mary lived together, perhaps with their brother, and no husbands are ever mentioned or implied.

That in itself is interesting, if not just plain strange, in a culture where marriage was highly valued. Perhaps they were widows whose husbands had died. But we don't get the impression that they were very old. They seem to be active women, and Mary had no trouble sitting on the floor to listen to Jesus. We certainly don't want to stain their reputation, but perhaps they had a past that they were not proud of. Perhaps Jesus's preaching had called them to repentance and converted them, and perhaps that was also the reason why they were so eager to host him and to serve him and to listen to him.

Whatever the case, Martha seems to have been the older of the two, since she is described as the one who took Jesus in. After welcoming Jesus into her home, you can just see her in your mind's eye as she hurries from place to place, from room to room. First she makes sure Jesus's feet are properly washed and that he has a comfortable place to sit or to recline. She makes sure he has something cold to drink if he is thirsty. Then back and forth as she prepares the different dishes for supper and sets the table. Our translation says she "was distracted with all her serving." The Greek word literally means "to be pulled around," but "to be distracted" is an excellent translation for that, because *distracted* comes from a Latin word that means the same thing—pulled in every direction. You can just imagine her wishing she could be in four places at the same time. But at the same time you can tell that serving is something she loves doing. She loves making sure her guests feel welcome and comfortable, that they have good drinks and delicious food to eat—and especially when her guest is Jesus.

And this is a virtue, isn't it? Paul tells us in Romans to practice hospitality. In 1 Timothy he tells us that showing hospitality is a particularly attractive virtue of Christian wives. Peter tells us in his first letter to offer hospitality without grumbling. The writer to the Hebrews tells us not to forget to receive and show hospitality even to strangers. Paul also says pastors in particular are to be hospitable, as an example to their flocks.

This is something of a lost art nowadays, isn't it? I once heard an Italian-American comedian joke about the difference between hearing the doorbell ring as a kid versus now. When he was a kid, the doorbell rang, and everyone bounded to the door. "Who could it be? Oh, look who it is! Come on in! Can I get you something cold to drink?" Nowadays, when you hear the doorbell ring, you immediately duck down and look at your other family member inquisitively and whisper, "Did *you* invite someone over?" Oftentimes, even with people we know, it's basically expected that they would stay at a local hotel or motel, at their own expense, rather than inconveniencing us. So under other circumstances, we might look at Martha and simply say, "Look, here is a shining example of dedicated hospitality and service with a smile."

Perhaps under other circumstances. As it is, even though Martha loves to serve and would otherwise be going about her work happily, she can't help but be a little irked as she goes back and forth between the rooms and hears Jesus teaching and talking about the kingdom of God, and when she goes past or into the room where he is talking, there is her sister, just sitting there on the floor at his feet, attentively and happily listening to him. "Of course, I'd love to sit down and listen to Jesus too," we can imagine her thinking, "if there wasn't all this work to be done. What about all the tasks and assignments we agreed to?"

Finally, she can't take it any more. She puts down whatever she has in her hand, walks into the room where Jesus and her sister are, and politely interrupts Jesus: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me."

Notice how there are two accusations here—one against the Lord and one against her sister. Martha certainly did not intend to accuse the Lord of any wrongdoing, but she does suggest that he doesn't care about her. He is so engrossed in his teaching that he is oblivious to Mary drowning in her service, oblivious to her need for help. The accusation against her sister is that she has chosen a lazy, selfish course of action (or rather, inaction)—one in which she has ignored all of her assignments and simply gets to sit there and do nothing, leaving Martha to do all the work.

But Jesus answers both accusations. He answers the accusation against himself by making it clear both that he does care about Martha and that he knew what was going on the entire time: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.” He answers the accusation against Mary by continuing, “But one thing is needed. In fact, Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away from her.” The Bible tells us there are different ways that things that are otherwise virtues can turn into vices, and this is one of them. Virtues can become vices when our virtues get in the way of the best virtue.

How Jesus simplifies everything, doesn't he? “You are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is needed.” There's really only one thing worth worrying and getting upset about, so to speak—the kingdom of God. Our relationship with God. Eternal life. For Mary, her other assignments and supper could wait. Right now, she had an opportunity to have her faith in God strengthened, to have her soul fortified, to have her eternal life assured for her through the word of God, spoken by the Son of God himself. She could have fulfilled one of her many assignments for serving Jesus, but “that better part,” the good part, the best assignment, was to be served by Jesus.

Mary's choice of the best assignment, Jesus says, would not be taken away from her. Jesus could mean one of two things by that. He could simply be telling Martha that he is not going to stop teaching Mary right now and that he is not going to tear Mary away from hearing and learning God's word. “You want me to tell Mary to go help you, but this assignment that Mary has chosen is not going to be taken away from her.”

Or he could be reminding Martha that hearing and learning God's word, being served by Jesus through his Word, is the one thing that cannot be taken away—not only from Mary, but from any of us. Think about it: No matter how much work you put into preparing a supper, it's gone by the end of the night and the echoes of the thank-yous, if you get any, quickly die away. One of my favorite desserts is apple pie, and even though my wife will gladly make one for me from time to time, she has commented more than once that it's a lot of work for something that doesn't last very long. Too quickly her service is taken away from her, when the pie plate is empty. No matter how much time you put into caring for your sick child, eventually the child recovers, God willing, and it's like the whole ordeal never happened. No matter how much work you put into the fields, eventually the harvest comes and it's all gone. And even if you take the longer view of this service, that in cooking and cleaning, in caring for the sick, and in planting, growing, and harvesting, you're helping to continue and sustain life as a whole, which lasts much longer than that meal or sickness or planting season, the fact is that that still comes to an end too. Death puts an end to all your service, no matter how good it is. It takes all of its fruits and successes away.

There is only one task, one assignment, that can never be taken away from you, when you consistently recognize it as the best assignment, the highest priority, and that is being served by Jesus through his Word. The fruits of having your soul fed by God's word last into eternity, because the chief fruit of having your soul fed by God's word is eternal life in heaven. And it is that assignment that gives eternal meaning to all of your other assignments too.

"One thing is needed." How do we put that into practice? Good question. There's obviously a balance to strike. God doesn't want us to forsake our regular working lives and to shut ourselves up in a monastery and to do nothing but be fed by God's word, do nothing but have the pitcher of our soul filled up with living water, and then never pour it out. Jesus did eventually eat supper that night. He did eventually need Martha's service.

On the other hand, Jesus is clearly telling us what the best assignment is. It is both the hardest and the easiest assignment we could have. It is the hardest because the devil, the sinful world, and our own sinful flesh know that it is good, and so they try to prevent us from doing it and help us come up with every excuse not to. But it is the easiest assignment because it's not really *our* task, *our* chore. It is an assignment where we simply sit and receive from Jesus—receive his love, his care, his rebuke, his free forgiveness, his promises, his body and his blood in bread and wine, his life eternal. Our best assignment is to let Jesus do his assignment, the assignment he lives for.

I know this isn't easy. I go into my office at 9 a.m. on Tuesday through Friday and there are a lot of good and godly assignments for me to do, things that I do to serve Jesus. And there are only so many hours in the day or in the week to do them. But those things, no matter how well I do them, will all be taken away from me. The bulletins won't last. Neither will the website or the podcast or my emails and letters. Those of you whom I visit and get to know (hopefully all of you who are members)—sorry for the cold splash of water, but one day I might be doing your funeral, and that will be that between you and me here on this earth. Yet in spite of the fact that I know all this, how hard it is for me to start my office hours by doing the one thing I need to do the most—to sit my butt down at Jesus's feet and to listen to his Word, to let him serve me, to have my soul fed by him.

Do you know that struggle too? The struggle to balance the service that needs to be done in the fields or in the woods or in the shop or in the office or at home—all of those good and godly assignments—with the best assignment?

If you know that struggle, then listen to Jesus rebuke you, rebuke me, ever so firmly, yet ever so gently: "Martha, Martha; Nathan, Nathan; members of Trinity, members of Trinity, there are so many things you are worried and concerned and stressed out and upset about, but there is really one thing that is needed. Who has control over the appetites of your guests, over the security of your job, over the abundance of the pheasants and the deer and when and where they appear, over the pH content and fertility of the soil, over the weather, over time, over all the events and needs throughout the earth? Put down your kettle, your book, your wrench. Close your laptop. Turn off your tractor. Unload your rifle and put it away for the moment. Come here and sit next to Mary. Have I got an assignment for you!

"Listen to me and live eternally."

Sound like a good assignment? Indeed it does. It is the best one. Amen.