“One Thing”

Luke 10:38-42 Revelation 3:14-22

Years ago, I had this friend, Jim, who was a pastor nearing retirement age. He was so excited about retiring. For months beforehand, he was regaling people about how wonderful it would be to sleep in and do nothing – to read some books and just relax after working so hard his whole career. But I told him, “Jim, pastors don’t retire. Some folks are great at it, but for whatever reason, pastors just don’t seem to do it: not really.” With a flash and a grin, he shot back, “Oh, I’m going to retire – you’ll see.”

So, Jim retired and I didn’t see him for a little while. When I did saw him again, months after his retirement, I said, “Hey, Jim! How’s retirement going?” And he said to me, “Elana, did you know that there are a lot of people – especially pastors– who are *really* bad at retiring? They find it so stressful and overwhelming. So, I made calls all over the presbytery and put together a brand new support group, which I’m leading, so they can sort through all their difficulties and really settle into retirement.” The man who was planning to relax and do nothing, basically made a second career of trying to help other people relax and do nothing.

We have this really basic assumption that the most important thing is what is being done. Think about it: when we greet someone, we say, “how are you doing?” If it’s been a while since we’ve seen someone, we say, “what have you been doing?” When we meet someone for the first time, we say, “Oh, and what do you do for a living?” We get excited about days where we were really productive, where we have something to show for our time. And even when we’re trying to be intentional about taking some time out to relax, slow down, recharge…we kind of feel bad about it, don’t we? So often, we lose track of time and start to ask ourselves, “what did I even do today?” This hyper-focus on doing is so strong that it ripples back into our faith: did I check off all the right boxes? Did I do enough to help others? Do I pray enough, give enough, evangelize enough, study enough, serve enough, love enough and on and on and on?

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus comes over for dinner to a house in a little village about a mile and a half outside of Jerusalem called Bethany – to the home of Martha and Mary. We remember that names in the Bible tell us something about the character of the person. Martha means “lady” like “lady of the house.” Mary, on the other hand, is named after Miriam, Moses’s sister who watched him float down the Nile in a basket. Miriam who sang and danced when the Red Sea was parted and helped lead the people through the wilderness. Her name means rebellious or bitter. Imagine that house with those two sisters growing up – Lady and the Rebel.

Anyhow, it is Martha who receives Jesus into the home, true to form for the lady of the house. She makes him her guest, but not like the kind of guest who’s allowed to rummage around the fridge and plop down on the couch like one of the family. She makes him a guest who will be served and taken care of – she makes all of Jesus’s needs her personal responsibility. She offers him the best hospitality she knows how.

That is her plan – it takes a lot of work to offer someone the best. I don’t know how many of you have ever hosted and cooked for a dinner party with multiple courses, attended by people who may not know one another, bouncing from stove to fridge to guest to beverage service and back again. Getting caught up in the whirlwind of making sure nothing burns and everyone’s smiling and, oh yeah, you’re supposed to be enjoying yourself, too – it’s a frenzy! Needless to say, Martha is distracted with a million things pulling her apart in a million directions.

There is so much to do so she marches over to yell at Jesus. Incidentally, this is one of my favorite parts of the story. How angry do you have to be at your sibling to interrupt Jesus in the middle of his teaching! And not just to interrupt him, but to fuss at him – really, to try to nag him into getting that rebel sister of yours to fall into line already! She says, “for goodness sakes, Jesus! Don’t you care? Aren’t you the least bit concerned that I’m working myself to death in the kitchen here and Mary is just, what, sitting there? Looking at you? Listening to you?! Come on! I can hear you in the kitchen and I’ve got things stirring, simmering, and sautéing all at the same time!” She seems to be saying, “Jesus, don’t you even care how hard I’m working for you? Do you see me at all? Because, once again, I’m alone. Mary is doing her own thing – whatever it is that she wants to do – and I’m stuck with the every day jobs that keep the roof on and the trains running on time. She always does this – she abandons me whenever she feels like it.”

Then, she says to Jesus, “tell her to help me.” And this isn’t just, “tell her to get her sorry behind into the kitchen with me RIGHT THIS MINUTE.” This is, “Tell her that she should grasp hold of the reason behind all this hard work. I need someone who’s on my side – who cares as much as I do about presenting a wonderful meal with all the love in my heart. I need someone to work side by side with me because they get why this is important.”

Jesus answers her – he considers what she has said, sees the pain in her eyes and says, “Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things.” Really, he’s saying, “I see that you are pulled apart in so many directions, that you are anxious about so much and have given yourself so many tasks that you feel you might shatter at any moment.” Behind her frustrated insistence, he sees a deeper wound and pain that almost screams to find rest. Jesus says, “there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Martha made herself so busy that she wasn’t there any more. She came up with so many things to do to make her feel like she was serving Jesus that she couldn’t see him any more. She was so caught up in her anger with her sister that she wasn’t hearing Jesus preach love right there in her very house. Martha was trying to do everything; Jesus said “there is need of only one thing.”

There is such simple beauty in Jesus’s teachings – just one thing. Why are we so sure that we need to be busy and overloaded with tasks and plans and strategies? We only need one thing. The profound wisdom of this teaching is that it reaches into any moment of our lives. How many things should I be doing right now? Listening to the sermon, thinking about the next hymn we’re going to sing, wondering what I left off my shopping list, noticing that guy’s weird shoes – what’s going on with that guy’s shoes? How many things should we be doing? One thing at a time. Doing one thing can mean sitting at Jesus’s feet; it can mean cooking a wonderful meal; it can mean taking time out to pray. Can we give ourselves permission to just do one thing?

Because as we get so swept up in being busy, you know we often find ourselves doing so many things that everything comes out wrong. Or, we do everything exactly, precisely right, but at the end of the day, our minds are so, so weary. Everything just goes gray until we sleep too few hours and caffeinate ourselves into another terribly productive day.

In our reading from Revelation, we find a vision of Jesus speaking to the church in Laodicea. Jesus sees that they are keeping busy, very busy, but what comes of their fevered activity? They cry out, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.” They fully believe that because of their busy-ness, they are rich. Every resource that they value flows to them in abundance – what more could they need? They can think of nothing that they lack.

But Jesus tells them that they don’t even realize how bad things have gotten for them. Jesus sees that they have been wearing themselves down with years and years of chasing after only material things. It has left them miserable, wounded, weary. They are pitiable because they need, basically, everything that truly matters. Spiritually, they have become destitute like the poorest beggar who is crouched over in need. Their vision is clouded and they have totally missed that they are vulnerable and exposed.

They are so set on the busy-ness of their lives, that Jesus responds in kind. “You want to keep busy? Spend your energy buying from me – gold refined by fire. That’s how you get to be truly rich. You want to heal your limping hearts? Buy the white robes of righteousness and faith that will lift you from your desperate scurrying here and there all the time. You want to find peace? Get a salve for your eyes to remove the cloudiness of sin that blocks your vision. If you really trust me, then you will be able to slow down – a little bit more at a time day by day.”

Jesus says, “be earnest and repent.” This word for earnest is the same as the word for “zeal” – it shares a root with the word “hot” so it has this sense of boiling and bubbling over – being eager and striving. Jesus says, “take all that energy that you were splitting between a hundred different things and do one thing passionately. Don’t forget to see how you’re spending your time and what you’re prioritizing. Put your heart into what you do, repent when you get it wrong, and then put your heart in all over again.”

Jesus is standing at the door knocking to come in to eat with you. Jesus is in your house teaching before the meal. What will you do? It’s easy to get so lost in our busy-ness that we can’t see Jesus anywhere. We start longing for him like a deer pants for a flowing stream. Can we do one thing – one thing just to start? Open the door, sit at his feet, hear the word spoken. With a single act, we will not undo years of programming that only productive people have value. But with a single act, we can get ourselves that much closer to this moment where God, Christ, Spirit have been waiting for us all along. Inhale, exhale, and know that the Lord is with you. Amen.