

Only One Thing Luke 10:38-42
July 17, 2016
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

Earlier this week I was making preparations for today's service, hoping to tie everything up so that I would be fully present for my son when he arrived home from his 3-week trip to Europe. I sat down with a blank page, and was very shortly afterwards distracted by a phone call from my son, who was due to arrive at the airport that evening.

"Mom," he said, "I ran to catch my connecting flight in Frankfurt and they wouldn't let me on the plane. They said they already rebooked me for a flight tomorrow since my plane was late and they are going to put me up in a hotel." He then said in so many words, "I'm ready to come home."

I went into a bit of a frenzy. I called the airlines and spoke with about 5 different agents and some of their supervisors, searching and seeking for some explanation of why he was turned away at the gate. Is this your new standard, that people show up with a ticket and a boarding pass and then are refused entry onto the plane? I asked them to look for other flights, there had to be another flight out of Frankfurt going to the States today, right? I exclaimed that my son was traveling alone for the first time, that he didn't know anyone in Frankfurt! No accommodating response from the other end of the phone, which made me even more riled up. Somebody help me help him!

I was distracted and worried about many things: Meetings that would now need to be rescheduled to accommodate the new flight arrival, the time wasted in trying to find answers and alternative solutions, my son alone in a foreign country overnight with no baggage and hardly any battery left on his cellphone.

Then, I thought to pray. I prayed that there would either be another flight that opened up or that God would grant us peace. My husband called and I told him the situation. "He's safe," he said, "That's what matters. I have to go." I was immediately humbled. I suddenly occurred to me that there are 18 year olds who go to war; there are 18 year olds who are being racially profiled and targeted; there are 18 year olds who are on rafts in the sea, hoping to escape fighting and destruction; there are 18 year olds who are hungry and sick, and must decide between food or medicine today. My perspective changed.

In today's Scripture, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home, yet she is busy and distracted; her sister Mary sits around listening to Jesus, and Martha asks him to tell Mary to help her. Jesus says there is only one thing needed; Mary has chosen the better part, and it won't be taken away from her. We can surmise what is the "only one thing" needed; however, Martha, who visited us back in March, was available to join us again today, and so I've invited her here to tell us the story from her perspective.

“Hi. For those of you who weren’t here last time, I’m Martha. Thank you for welcoming me back here to speak. I certainly didn’t think it would be so soon. Out of all the Bible passages, it’s pretty amazing that the few that mention me were read so close together in your lectionary readings.

It’s an honor to be able to tell my story. As I mentioned last time, I’m often best known for opening my house to Jesus, and then wasting time in the kitchen making preparations while my sister Mary stays at Jesus’ feet. Mary chose the better part, which would not be taken away from her.

When we heard Jesus was coming through Bethany again, I was a bit anxious. (Mary had promised to help me.) See, what people often miss in the Scripture is the “they” at the beginning. Pictures are painted of the 3 of us, Mary, Jesus, and me, but every time Jesus visited, there were more and more people who joined him. I knew there was a lot to prepare, I knew the people in town had heard he and his friends were coming, and there would be a crowd in our tiny house. I was worried for days and hadn’t slept.

When Jesus healed my brother Lazarus, I believed. I believed that he could accomplish anything in the name and power of the love of God. But when your soul is not rooted and anchored in Jesus, you drift away. I forgot. I went back to worrying.

Mary spent the days before Jesus came praying, and it concerned me. I had to do the preparations for the visit. I was focused on her and what she wasn’t doing and when the crowds showed up, the “they,” the 12 hungry disciples and the 30 or 40 others, I panicked. There wasn’t going to be enough food, or places for everybody. I forgot who it was that was the guest of honor. I forgot to focus on him.

When the breaking point came, when I saw the crowds and then Mary sitting with Jesus, I snapped. I called out, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” Honestly, I thought she was the one needing correction, not me – after all, she seemed to be the one breaking the rules – it was indecent, her sitting at his feet like that as if she were... a disciple, a student, worthy of being taught by him. I was doing what we were supposed to do, what needed to be done.

Jesus called back, “Martha, Martha,” and he said my name so lovingly it immediately softened my heart. He reminded me how worried and distracted I am, how distracted from him I am, and I understood. It wasn’t my tasks and busyness that Jesus was assessing -- someone had to prepare, someone had to serve -- it was the way I was going about it.

Mary took a risk to break from what was expected of her by others. Not only was she sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to him; she was free from all other

distractions and expectations, she was reveling in being in the presence of the Lord, so close to God, and this is what she was praised for by Jesus. She was breaking barriers, and Jesus was inviting me to do the same. He was inviting me to accept the love that he so freely offered. I understood then that Jesus is about new life. Jesus is about a second chance, an opportunity to do things differently, with God's peace in mind.

Only one thing is needed: honoring the presence of God. Jesus wasn't going to allow that to be taken from Mary. She had it, and he wanted her to keep it. There is a resulting gratitude and peace that comes from that. A trust and acceptance that all is just as it is supposed to be. An ability to hear what it is that God is saying. When I stopped, when I was able to sit with the Lord for just a moment, somehow everything that needed to – all the work, all the preparations, somehow were completed.

We can't see the big picture, but God can. We may be suffering, but God can and will use it for the greater good if we seek that. Viktor Frankl, who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* after surviving the Nazi death camps says: "The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me." He says, "The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance." When we have God with us, not in some other room out there, but really with us, we will see choices, opportunities, we will have peace, we will be grateful.

Jesus offered me an option that day – freedom. It's what I see in the movements happening today, where people speak truth to power and demand justice. I'm sorry about the last couple of weeks you've had in this country. There's been so much violence and death. And healing too.

It's hopeful what the President said this week, not to give in to despair, to pray for the wounded, and like Viktor Frankl, he said we must find meaning amidst our sorrow. He quoted Ezekiel: that the Lord has promised to take our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh, which reminded me of the hope and freedom I was given.

At the vigil last Friday in Dallas, the mayor, Mike Rawlings, also quoted Scripture, saying, "In the end, three things remain – faith, hope and love. We need all three today. We must have faith in each other, in our institutions, we must have hope that tomorrow will be better, and it will. And we must love one another."

Dallas Police Chief David Brown spoke about the crisis facing law enforcement, his experience as a black man in Texas, guns and division, and he said what kept him going was "God's grace and sweet, tender mercies."

At memorial services across the country, as worshipers mourned the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, and the five police officers - Brent Thompson, Lorne

Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, and Patrick Zamarripa, some prayed for the souls of the men who pulled the triggers. Some thanked God for the sacrifices the police made daily to protect their cities. Some thanked God for the technology that allowed the world to see controversial acts of police violence toward African-Americans. This time of reflection, of contemplation, of prayer, is a healthy response to the tragedies. There will be good, benefit, that will come from this. As we know from our faith tradition, it is from the darkness of suffering and pain that the light eventually comes through. Another fine saying from Viktor Frankl is, "What is to give light must endure burning."

I know your church is going through transitions and this too is going to be okay. You have so much goodness here. I heard about the ways that people step up to help one another. That men help out in the kitchen here, and help prepare and serve communion; that when people are out of town or ill, others gladly step in to help serve as liturgist, greet at the door, host the Fellowship Hour, and deliver meals to those living without homes. That you are able to ask one another for help in a kind and sensitive way. I know this might sound like an easy and simple thing, but as you can see from my story, it's not. Be grateful that you are able to ask for help in this place, and that people step up for one another without bitterness. There is joy here. I see you serving with joy.

This is what was missing for me. I was serving, but not with joy. I had my priorities mixed up. Jesus helped me to see that day that it was about the relationship that mattered. That if I could be truly present with him, checking in always, that I need never worry or fear. I'd be able to hear exactly what he has to say. It's a deliberate practice, because we forget. That's why we need church; it helps us remember how to be in relationship with God. It helps us remember that we are fully and completely loved. So for those of you who are doers like me, there is no shame in this. Let God in, and accept God's loving presence in all you do. May our time in prayer, our time spent with God, however that is, be fruitful today, and always. Thanks be to God."

Thank you, Martha. I learned a lot from Martha this week. I wrote a letter to the airline's feedback department. I apologized for my exasperation and demanding tone on the phone and thanked them for their exceptional generosity in providing my son with a place to stay, transportation, and meal tickets to the dinner and breakfast buffets. And I actually told them that I was able to come to this realization of gratitude after prayer. I heard back from the airlines the very next day. They said they appreciated that I took time out of my busy schedule to write to them, because it is unusual for people to write about something good.

Let us now honor God's presence by singing together hymn #435, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*.