

The Gospel for Martha

Note: this sermon isn't about a lost Gospel. The title is not "The Gospel *of* Martha" but "The Gospel *for* Martha." Historically, Martha is the 'loser' in this battle of the sisters. I don't have stats, but I'll bet even when Martha was a popular name it still wasn't as popular as Mary. Okay, most were named for Jesus' mother. Still even though Martha is named first here and John 11 doesn't name Mary at all but just refers to her as Martha's sister, Martha's second fiddle. No, ladies group I know is named "Martha Mary Guild"; it's always "Mary Martha." Let's rehearse this text. Jesus surely means to give Martha gospel. When a name is doubled like David does his beloved son Absalom, like Jesus does the city of Jerusalem when weeping over it, "Martha, Martha" is spoken with Gospel intent.

The Gospel *for* Martha begins with the fact that Jesus *does* care. Martha senses as much. Her question in Greek expects a 'yes' answer from Jesus. "Lord – and notice she calls Him her Lord – "surely You *do* care that my sister has left me alone to serve." Yes, you could take this as Martha sinfully assuming in her prayers that whatever she wants Jesus does too. However, even if that's the case, the fact that Jesus *does* care is Gospel. He cares about birds of the air, flowers of the field, dimly burning faith, and more. Jesus at least cares as well as a sinful parent does. When a child has got themselves in a bind, is all worked up, even if their own fallenness has everything to do with it, we still care, don't we?

1 Peter 5:7 says as much. It directs us to "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." Peter could be recalling this passage. Martha declares that Jesus surely does *melei*. After referring to Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, in verse 4. Peter says in verse 7, He *melei* for you. So harried, hurried Martha knows that much, and that much is Gospel. Do we? I don't always. How about you? This is the story where the little girl comes crying to her daddy that she pinched her finger. He irritably says, "Well what do you want me to do about it?" She turns and walking away says, "At least you could say, 'Ouch'." Jesus cares enough to say 'ouch' about all our cares. In fact, Jesus cared all the way to death. This is the illustration: I asked Jesus how much He cared and He spread out His arms wide and said, "I care this much" and so was crucified. If He bore our transgression, which He did; if he bore our griefs and sorrows, which He did, then surely He bore ~~and~~ bears our cares and anxieties.

The Gospel *for* Martha continues in the verse our sermon hymn is based on. This 17th century hymn has one of those tell-all German titles. "One thing is needful. Luke 10:42. Jesus, who of God is made unto us Wisdom and Righteousness and Sanctification and Redemption. 1 Cor. 1:30" (*Handbook of TLH*, 262). So what is the one thing needful? Barclay, among other commentators, says that Jesus means only a one course meal is needed; don't make a fuss. No, the one thing needful is Jesus and His Word, but those commentators are on to something. The comparison here is between one and many. The Greek doesn't say Martha was distracted by "all" the serving as our insert has it but by 'many'. And Jesus says Martha is "anxious and troubled about many things," but only 'one thing' is needed. Mary has chosen not what is better but "the good part" singular.

Under the influence of the KJV, we see Martha "cumbered about much serving". When I hear cumber I think of weight not number. The translation "cumber" translates a Greek word only used here in the NT. It was used by medical writers but not that often. Dr. Luke uses it here and it means to be drawn around, away, this way and that. It's passive and imperfect. Do you really need me to illustrate this for you? This is my Alabama song: "I'm in a hurry to get things done/ Oh, I rush and rush until life's no fun/ All I really gotta do is live and die/ Even I'm in a hurry and don't know why". This is Jackson Brown, "Running on Empty." This is doing, as Luther said Melancthon did, sucking up cares like a leech does blood (*Plass, Luther*, 99).

I'm so distracted; I'm so pulled hither and thither by life, by politics, by family, by future. And Jesus does here what the 2016 Visa commercial depicted but in a good way. In that commercial everything is moving, going and driving, till some one pays by cash not credit. That halt is bad. Jesus' halt is like marital artists for whom time stops and he can see everything in slow motion. Or like Robert Redford in *The Natural* for whom everything but the strike zone is blotted out when he focuses. Jesus stops it all for us by saying: only one thing is needed not the many. With college kids, who have been infected with Jesus has *a* plan for your life, I often have used the 19th century story "The Lady and the Tiger". The king gives criminals a 50-50 chance by having them chose between two doors one with a tiger one with a lady. The "God's got *a* plan" for your life view has not one good and one bad door but literally 1,000 doors with tigers behind them and just one that has God's plan. No, with God one thing is needful,

and having Him whatever you do is blessed. This is Augustine's statement variously translated "Love God and do as you please." "Love God and do as you wish." "Love God and do what you will" (NPNF, VII, 504).

Jesus doesn't say Martha's rushing and working is sin, but it's got a claim of necessity on her that is false. Read Mat. 6. Using the same word for "worried" used here, Jesus sets the one Kingdom of God over all the worries for life, food, drink, clothes, length of life, or tomorrow. There's a movie where a coach holds up a football and tells the young athletes, "This is life." It ain't and neither are the dozens of things turning me every which way but lose. Jesus says there is just one thing needed. It's Him. His life in place of mine. His damned death on my behalf. His Word, His Water, His Body and Blood that mark me for everlasting life. Love that and do whatever, because in loving this you will do what is God pleasing.

The Gospel for Martha continues. Jesus saying that His one thing will never be taken away implies everything else will. He's promising what Melville says a blacksmith can't. The blacksmith says he can smooth out all seams, ridges, and dents but one: those formed on the anxious brow (*Moby Dick*, 343). You and I, along with all who cherish Jesus' one needful thing, are assured that His *Words* of promise and forgiveness; His *Water* of rescue from death and devil. His *Body and Blood* will never be taken away from us. There is good news, comfort, peace there, but there is Gospel for Martha here too.

From Martha's standpoint, and mine too when I'm worried and upset, anxious and troubled, it's real Gospel to hear, even by implication, that all this will be taken away from me. This is the story I tell of saltwater fishing where the boy across from us is begging his dad to reel in the shark he just hooked. The dad is reluctant but the boy begs. Now when you land a shark in a boat it doesn't stop thrashing and biting, As the dad boats the shark, it's biting and snapping and twisting. I hear the boy frantically pleading, "Put it back! Put it back!" Worry is like that. Bring it on board the boat of your life and it doesn't stop biting. The answer to worry biting and snapping is Jesus throwing it overboard. Better yet, His cutting the line before you land it.

Sound to "how to" for you? Consider this: What I've said by saying, "Don't bring the shark worry into your boat" is the message of this text. Don't focus on the myriad of circumstances that confront you, but on Jesus. We all refer to this as the story of "Mary and Martha" but attention is riveted on Jesus. Three times the Lord is mentioned. First and last have the article. Mary sat at *the* Lord's feet. Martha comes to Jesus saying, "Surely you do care Lord." And finally, "Martha, Martha *the* Lord answered." Our closing hymn speaks of our dying with these words: "When Thy voice shall bid our conflict cease." But we don't have to wait till we die for the conflict to cease: In Ps. 46:10, *the* Lord says, "Be still and know that I'm God." O happy day. Isaiah 40 promises that those waiting on the Lord get eagle wings spouting out their backs to fly above it all, and run not on empty but without wearying.

In a sermon Luther cited our 1 Peter 5 passage saying, "But let the Christian cast His heart and its anxieties upon God. God is strong to bear and He can easily carry the burden. Besides, He has commanded that all this be put on Himself. The more thou layest upon Him, the more pleasing it is to Him" (Lenker, VIII,74). You should know that Luther struggled with worry to the point of deep depression. After his mopping around the house for sometime, wife Katie but a funeral wreath on the door. Luther seeing this says, "On top of all our cares, someone has died. Who is it?" Katie responds, "By the way your fretting God must have."

It's not true that the line between Christian and not is worry. Walther, a 19th century American Lutheran scholar said, "In reality, Christians suffer far greater anxiety, worry, and tribulation than do worldly people" (*Law & Gospel*, 61). No, the line between being a Christian and not is not worry, but the line between worry and not is Jesus. You know it isn't you because a sure way for you to stoke worry is to tell yourself, "Stop worrying". It's the whole "don't think of a pink elephant" thing. There's two prayers of Luther I use. One is his sacristy prayer in my office: "Use me as Thy instrument in Thy service. Only do not Thou forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction." The second is a bedtime prayer of Luther's: "'My dear God, now I lie down and turn Your affairs back to You; You may do better with them. If You can no better than I, You will ruin them entirely. When I awake, I will gladly try again'" (Brecht, *Luther* III, 14).

See? Luther was a Martha too, but the Gospel led him to let his worries go in prayer. Amen

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