

SERMON: One Thing
TEXT: Luke 10:38-42

7-10-22

City Slickers is a movie from 1991 starring Billy Crystal as a middle-aged man named Mitch, who is having a midlife crisis. He has just turned 39 and feels like the best part of his life is over. His two friends, also having crises of their own, talk him into taking a two-week vacation to the Wild West, where they will drive cattle from New Mexico to Colorado. A tough, old cowboy named Curly, who is leading them on this adventure, has a conversation with Mitch about life.

Holding up his index finger, Curly says, “You know what this is? The secret of life.” “*Your finger?*” Mitch jokes. “One thing,” Curly explains. “*What’s the one thing?*” “That’s what you’ve got to figure out for yourself.”

ONE THING. It’s not a bad lesson. Mitch had been distracted by thoughts of growing older. He was distracted by an unfulfilling job, by his receding hairline, by worries that he hadn’t accomplished anything, and by the idea that life had passed him by. But with time away from his routine and with a new perspective that came with a change of scenery, Mitch discovers that the one thing

– the secret of life – for him is his wife and children. His family is what makes life worth living for him. His family is what puts a smile on his face.

Well, from the story of Martha and Mary, which many of us know so well, we hear Jesus telling Martha, “You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” But like Curly the cowboy, Jesus doesn’t tell Martha what that one thing is.

Martha reminds me of my mom in some ways. Often our family would be the one who hosted the rest of the family for major holiday celebrations. So, of course, there was a lot of work to be done: cleaning and cooking and showing hospitality to our extended family. I often wondered why my mom put herself through all this. She lived a stressful life as a single parent who was going to school and working and keeping house and paying the bills. And then to play hostess on top of all these other obligations only added more stress to her life. These occasions that should have been joyful and relaxing, instead were times when she felt pressured, she became short tempered, and she ended the day exhausted. And, yes, she complained about other family members who barely lifted a finger to help.

Like Martha, she was worried and distracted from the ONE THING, the most important thing.

There's the problem, as I see it. So often with this story, we tend to see Mary and Martha in competition with one another. They were sisters, after all, and sisters are often naturally competitive. These sisters are also very different; they have different gifts, different priorities, different personalities. But I think we make a mistake when we imagine Mary as the *winner* in this scenario, applauding her choice to sit and listen to Jesus, while we shake our heads at Martha for being the hostess with the mostess. Of course, Jesus doesn't help the matter when he declares that, "Mary has chosen the better part."

But, I think there's another way to look at this. First, remember that hospitality was of utmost importance in their world, so someone had to be working, cooking, tending to the needs of the guests. Martha wasn't just showing off; she was doing what was expected of her; she was serving her guests, making them comfortable, offering a warm welcome. She was performing a very important role.

And to be fair, Mary probably *should* have been helping Martha. It really was not her place to sit at the feet of Jesus. That place was for the men, so it was a bold move for Mary which probably got her more dirty looks than just the ones from her sister.

From this perspective, Martha is the one doing the right thing, and Mary's choice is out of line.

But here's the important distinction, in my view. Mary is fully focused on Jesus. She wants to bask in his presence, absorb every word he says. She wants to feel the love and acceptance in his eyes, memorize the gestures of his hands, hear the soothing tone of his voice. Mary is fully involved, fully engaged, fully attentive to Jesus. While Martha has lost her focus.

Martha's attitude has soured. She's more anxious about getting the food to the table on time than on the opportunity to break bread with her dear friend – the most important person in the room. She's more concerned about what others are *not* doing than on the purpose of her task. Instead of humbly and joyfully serving

her houseguest and her Lord, Martha is aggravated with her sister to the point of tattling on her. She has become “worried and distracted.” Martha has lost her focus on Jesus and on showing hospitality.

I don't have to tell you that in our time, we are not unfamiliar with this problem. There are kids who go to school just to be with their friends. It's good to have friends, of course, and at least they're in school. But they've lost their focus on what school is for: working and learning and growing.

Furthermore, those who are elected to public office are called to be public “servants.” But how often are they really focused on serving the public? They talk about it a lot, and occasionally I do think they are interested in the common good. More often, however, I'm afraid they are fulfilling their own desires for money and power.

You may have lost focus in your own life. And sometimes the church loses focus, too. We have so many selfish wants and desires, so many ideas about what

everyone else should be doing, that we have lost sight of the ONE THING we all need.

That one thing is Jesus. We need to focus on Jesus. We need to sit at his feet and listen to what he is saying. We need to slow down, take a deep breath, and think about what Jesus would do in response to the hate and violence in our world. We need to look carefully at our own distractions before we criticize the choices of others. We need to get back to our main purpose of loving God and loving one another as Christ commanded, without getting caught up in judging whether they deserve it.

One biblical scholar pointed out that Jesus wasn't scolding Martha as much as he was inviting her. "The one thing needed is for Martha to receive the gracious presence of Jesus, to listen to his words, to know that she is valued not for what she does or how well she does it, but for who she is as a child of God." (Elisabeth Johnson, www.workingpreacher.org, July 21, 2013)

Children of God, as we are invited to focus on Jesus, let's remember that Jesus was always focused on those around him: seeking, teaching, healing, welcoming, loving, living, and dying. Because God so loved the world.

“There is need of only one thing.” May we focus our lives on Christ, and may that ONE THING guide and direct us throughout our lives... to the glory of God!

AMEN.