

Concentrating on what's Important¹

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'—Luke 10.38-42*

I have family members who live in Ohio who have long been ardent Ohio State University Buckeye fans. What makes you an ardent "Bucks" fan? When the Ohio State football team loses to the University of Michigan, ardent Bucks fans go into a near-clinical level of depression that lasts about a week.

A funny thing happened to that enthusiasm about three years ago. Our niece found the perfect college and was accepted there. You guessed it. She went to the University of Michigan. Suddenly, the outcome of those football games doesn't seem quite as important.

What I'd like to propose is that a lot of other loyalties that we hold can and do change as we get on in life—much like team sports loyalties. You pour your life and soul into a job and your company is sold—maybe to a former competitor. Suddenly, you're working for the enemy. How'd that happen? Or your job is in one of the dozens of whole industries that are

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on January 3, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia.

disappearing. I'm thinking of newspapers, or semi-conductors, the family farm, printing operations, and on and on. One commentator made the snide but possibly true remark that everything is declining these days. So you pour your time and passion into a job only to find that it isn't needed or important any more. Lots of people have had that experience. I read recently that 71% of Americans are working in industries with declining demand for their products or services.

What I'm trying to plant here goes deeper. Truth itself isn't what it used to be. When I grew up news anchor, Walter Cronkite would end every broadcast with his signature sign-off: "And that's the way it is." Now we have cable news that never signs off—CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC—and if you surf between them you've got to wonder if they are living in the same world. The slant or slants that can be taken on the news probably means that no one could ever again get away with saying: "That's the way it is." These days the viewer is the one who has to figure out how it is out there.

Even those principles that our grandparents held to be rock solid are shifting. As a theologian I can assure you that there is rapid revision in our understanding of faith. There is much institutional change in the church. Moreover, family has changed, ethics have changed, ideas about what makes a man or

what makes a woman have changed, history, and what's important to memorize and read in school.

Now, I mention all of this as we put behind us one of the most tumultuous years ever in our nation's history and also in the experience of this church.

What I'd like to aspire to myself in this New Year and invite you to consider also is to a renewed effort to concentrate on what's important.

One of the great gifts of our faith is that it holds up for each of us a way and a truth and a life that will never fade or be revised or phased out. We get a wonderful snap shot of this in the story of Jesus' visit to the sisters Mary and Martha. They did great in inviting Jesus into their home. That obviously is a step each of us is called to make, namely inviting Jesus into our lives. That accomplished, we see in this story another level of choosing of what is needful, namely, listening to and learning from Jesus. Martha assumed that she needed to cook her famous cabbage rolls and whipped potatoes for Jesus while he was in town. So there she was juggling pots and pans in the kitchen—all for a good cause. Martha's idea of the right thing to do for Jesus was to be the gracious hostess. Sister Mary simply had a conversation with Jesus. And, as it

turns out, it was Mary, who perfectly located what is essential or important—being a student and companion of Jesus.

How often do we commit ourselves to our Christian faith and then march off to what we assume is what helps and advances his purpose. We may be generous with the poor. We may build our families. We may work at honorable jobs. We vote for causes that improve the world. But we can miss listening and learning and talking to Jesus.

How's the story go of the young minister in a growing church? The Presbytery Executive comes to visit and he sits in the pastor's office. The minister brags about being on community committees and running to the hospital and organizing new programs. The old exec listens patiently and then finally says: "With all your busyness, when are you alone with God?" The minister is silent. But with that conversation, he committed himself to praying every day. A year later he reports that a fresh effectiveness and power has come into his ministry that he had never realized was missing.

I would propose that all the churn and shifting values and disappearing causes that beckon us to throw ourselves into in our time is actually a good thing. The change puts us in a position to appreciate what we glimpse at in this simple little story. One thing is needful—the conversation with Jesus. It's

the one truth, the one value that will guide us when all the other foundations and causes and loyalties are shaking.

Several of you have been watching the documentary on Dietrich Bonhoeffer in connection with our class on the Old Testament Prophets. You may know that Bonhoeffer was the wonderful German pastor and theologian who was part of the resistance to Hitler. I was quite struck by one sentence in the film that goes along with what we're learning from Mary and Martha. "...The old kind of ethics doesn't work anymore...the rules have changed so radically under Nazism." In the weeks before his execution he wrote:

It is not by ideals and programs or by conscience, duty, responsibility and virtue that reality can be confronted, but simply and solely by the perfect love of God.

And isn't that the way Jesus lived? I don't so much get the sense that Jesus' perfect life came because he managed to obey all the rules. The rules never directed Jesus to reach out to people or suffer on a cross. The genius of Jesus' life came because he walked and talked with God the Father. Jesus" too chose the good portion, and all that was needful.

And so may we! If you've been murky or unclear on the very core of faith—consider Mary. Consider Jesus. You can pray. You can listen. You can obey. You can follow. You can learn. Choose the good portion!

The unchangeable foundation of life is that we can talk to God and live out of that conversation. Martha was admirable and self-sacrificing and earnest and generous. But Mary, at Jesus' feet, hit upon the heart of what Jesus came to give. In a shifting and maddening world, that alone is what's necessary and what will last.