

*A Sermon delivered by The Rev. Sarah Reed at The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 22, 2007, 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, dedicated to the glory of God!*

## **“Of Ultimate Concern”**

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.”* LUKE 10:38-42

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We recently had a department picnic at our house – one of those annual events where I feel compelled to have my house cleaner than it’s been since last year’s picnic, my garden as colorful as the ones at Franklin Park, and the food as yummy as if it were prepared by Bobby Flay or Paula Dean. I become an anxious hostess, probably more anxious than Martha.

Good hospitality means setting a proper table. Theologically speaking, hospitality is vital. Not because of the food – how much there is and what is served is not important. A little bread and a cup of wine will do in most cases, because what truly brings us together is the word of God. In today’s gospel, we are cautioned that preoccupation with arrangements, ala anxiety, can lead us to lose contact with what is of ultimate concern.

In last week’s reading, the lawyer came to Jesus to ask “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In Luke, we find a two-fold response: The first answer came last week – you must love your neighbor as

yourself. When you see (and seeing can be a challenge) yourself or your neighbor in trouble, Ron encouraged us to follow through with compassion. The second way to eternal life comes through devotion to Jesus' teachings, as an expression of one's love for God. This means attending to what is of ultimate concern.

The Martha and Mary contrast is a familiar one. Martha and Mary have become symbols for a busy, action focused life or a more laid back, contemplative approach to life. Martha is concerned about many things, all of them are temporary and related to this moment. Mary is concerned about one thing, which is ultimate, perhaps infinite. Martha is presented as anxious and closed; Mary as content and open.

To Martha's appeal, Jesus responds, "Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things." We have a pretty good idea what worry means. Worry happens when your teenage son is supposed to call when he arrives at his destination, and hours after the estimated time of arrival there is no phone call. When that happened to me, I considered calling the police or the hospital. As it turned out, there was nothing wrong except his forgetfulness. Worry happens when the money in the checking account is not enough to cover the bills – whether they are yours or the church's.

What do we do with worry and anxiety? Telling someone, "Don't worry," just keeps their mind on worrying. It's like telling someone, "Don't think of a big, blue elephant." What immediately comes to mind – the blue elephant! When I'm in the hospital, sitting with parents as they await their kids' test results, I try to encourage them to consider what is known and not to allow their imaginations to become overactive. Imagination is a wonderful gift, but there are times when it just gets in the way. You may recall Bobby McFerrin singing,

Don't worry, be happy.

In every life we have some trouble

But when you worry you make it double  
Don't worry, be happy.

Being happy requires more than that little dance Bobby performed as he sang. Finding ways to drop our anxiety is a beginning.

Jesus observed that Martha was distracted. In Greek, to “be distracted” literally means “to be pulled from all directions.” Martha is being pulled by her expectation to offer her best hospitality to this friend she loves. Jesus isn't anxious about the possibility of a late dinner or a simple dinner or even no dinner – he's already been through that temptation about living on only bread.

I've heard many sermons that state that Martha's way is inferior. But the Martha's of our world keep things running. They are the ones who preserve and enrich life. Without Martha's attention, Mary could not have listened to Jesus. Once I heard a sermon dedicated to justifying Martha's busy-ness. The preacher focused on Martha's praying as she scurried about the house. There are so many concerns in our lives and in human life in general that demand our attention. They are important, often very important for you and for me and for the world. But they are not *ultimately* important. Jesus praises Mary, not Martha, because she has chosen the right thing, the only thing of ultimate concern.

Theologian Paul Tillich has written, “The hour of a church service and every hour of meditative reading is dedicated to listening in the way Mary listened. Something is being said to us, to the speaker as well as to the listeners, something about which we may become infinitely concerned. This is the meaning of every sermon. It shall awaken infinite concern.” At least, that is the hope of the sermon writer.

When we are concerned about something, it means we are involved in it, that a part of ourselves is in it, that we participate with all our hearts, even anxiously involved. Concern and anxiety are closely

linked. Wherever there is involvement, anxiety is near by. There are many things which interest us, that trigger our compassion or horror. But they are not our real concern; they do not produce this driving anxiety which is present when we are genuinely and seriously concerned. In our story, Martha was anxious.

I don't know about you, but on any given day I may be concerned about: My work. I need my work to provide me with food and shelter. Work can be loved or hated. I love my work. I'm a chaplain and chaplain educator at Children's Hospital. I love the gifts of compassion I see shared there each day. But anxiety holds onto me whenever I experience my limits, especially when I think about papers due and committee requirements to be met. I'm concerned about my relationships. I cannot imagine living without their love and companionship. But I become worried when I think about the indifference, anger and jealousy, the hidden hostility I experience in myself as well as in those I love. I'm concerned about my aging parents. Are they comfortable? What are their worries? I'm concerned about myself. I strive for happiness; I love to laugh and have a good time. My anxiety rises when I look myself in the mirror. Am I the person I wish to be? Learning to see and accept the God-ness within me is an ongoing process.

These are some of my concerns. No doubt you have others. And we cannot forget the most universal concern of everything that lives, the concern for life – for our daily bread. Although we may not be concerned personally, the concern for food, clothing, and shelter for the mentally ill and/or homeless of our community is overwhelming. The welfare of indigent persons throughout the world surpasses most other human concerns.

Jesus was concerned about the poor and marginalized. He was moved by the misery of others and his teachings are the foundation of our social gospel. Jesus felt compassion for the sick and healed them. He saw separation and gathered folks together in community.

He wrestled with what is truth and struggled against injustice. He crafted stories that were meaningful for his listeners. In doing all of these things, he ministered to what was needed in those very moments and he made real what is the loving will of God.

But are these noble concerns the “one thing” that is needed and the right thing that Mary has chosen? To say that we are not anxious about the misery of peoples throughout the world, about those who are sick and have lost hope, about achievement scores in our schools, about hatred that enters our workplaces, churches, and homes would be a lie. These anxieties are greater than those about our daily life, but they are not the “one thing.”

The objects of our concerns are connected with our worries and anxieties – probably because we become devoted and passionate about them. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t achieve what we do. Why, then, do they make us restless in the deepest corners of our hearts, and why does Jesus seem to dismiss them as not ultimately needed?

As Jesus indicated in His words about Mary, it is because they can be taken from us. They all come to an end; all of our concerns are finite. In our lives we’ve seen significant concerns disappear and new ones emerge. They will also disappear. Many great concerns of the past have vanished and more will come to an end, sooner or later.

What, then, is the one thing that we need? What is the right thing that Mary has chosen? Answering these questions is as difficult as drawing a picture of God, which is impossible. If the answer is “religion,” this may be misunderstood as meaning a set of beliefs and activities. Martha was at least as religious as Mary. Religion can be a human concern on the same level as those other concerns, creating the same anxiety as the others. If I answer “God,” this may also be misunderstood. Even God can become made a finite concern,

an object among other objects for some to believe and others not. Such a finite God cannot be our ultimate concern. Or we may make God a person like other persons with whom we have a relationship. Such a person may support our immediate concerns, but may fade as our ultimate concern.

The one thing needed is to be concerned ultimately and unconditionally. This is what Mary was. This is what Martha felt and what made her angry, and it's what Jesus praises in Mary. Mary became ultimately concerned. This is the one thing needed – to offer ultimate and unconditional attention; to be present within this moment, not the past or the future. When we attend to this moment all of those things that fill our imaginations are still there but we see them differently – the anxiety is gone! Its power is broken; it cannot destroy us. The minute that has passed can never be reclaimed. The minute that is yet to come happens only in our minds. I have this moment to say, “I love you” or to say nothing at all. I have only this moment to see the presence of God, in this person, whether Samaritan, victim, woman, or whether you or me.

Be not anxious or afraid. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Amen.