

Sermon – Luke 10:38-42; Colossians 1:15-29  
David R. Lyle  
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### “One Needful Thing”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Some years ago, in the op-ed pages of the *New York Times*, Tom Friedman wrote of a ride he took in a taxi in Paris. Over the course of the hour-long trip, Friedman made note of he and the driver doing six things. Friedman, as the passenger, sat, worked on his laptop, and listened to his iPod. The driver drove, talked on his cell phone, and watched a video. This last action of the driver must have created some anxiety for the passenger! “There was only one thing we never did,” Friedman wrote: “talk to each other.” He went on to quote Linda Stone, who has written that the disease of the Internet age is “continuous partial attention.” I confess that I find that phrase convicting. How often am I thinking about too many things at once, without ever truly turning my attention in one direction or the other? How often do I allow myself to be pulled, physically and emotionally, in manifold directions at once? The many gizmos at our disposal certainly contribute to our distraction. But I don’t think we can blame our gadgets. The commentator James Wallace muses that continuous partial attention is perhaps “not only the disease of the Internet age; perhaps it has always been with us, and just the causes of our inattention have altered.”
2. Following last Sunday’s Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke turns his attention to matters more domestic. While we know Mary and Martha from John’s Gospel, it is Luke alone who records this story. It’s a scene many of us

know well. Martha welcomes Jesus into her home and sets about the many tasks which hospitality demands of her. Mary, however, just sits down at Jesus' feet and listens, without another care in the world, it seems. Martha, with an exasperation clearly conveyed in the text, asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her. But Jesus does not. "Martha, Martha," he gently chides, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." The story itself is straightforward, but we've added a lot to it over the years. Mostly we've added our own interpretive layers to Martha's activities and words. We imagine her as a nag, or a busybody, or an overachiever, or the perfect straw woman for a Lutheran polemic against the dangers of works righteousness. She may, I suppose, be any or all these things. But neither Luke nor Jesus level such accusations. We simply hear once that she is worried and twice that she is distracted.

3. It's worth noting that Martha is not rebuked for tending to her many tasks, even if they ultimately pale when compared to sitting at the feet of Jesus. Hospitality, as we well know, may be a fair amount of work, but it is also a gift. An act of joy. To welcome someone into your home or church, to prepare a meal and grant respite, is a sign of grace. Early in the story of God and God's chosen people, we see Abraham and Sarah roll out the welcome wagon at the oaks of Mamre in response to a triune theophany. We are enjoined in the Epistle to the Hebrews to show hospitality to strangers, for we may be entertaining angels unawares. Just yesterday, the people of this congregation did one of the things you do best. You showed hospitality to the grieving by preparing a meal to share after Don's memorial service. Let us not pretend that Martha's problem is her desire to be hospitable. Her problem is her distractedness. The original Greek makes this clearer, as Mark Bangert points out: "In verse 40 the Greek word for 'distracted' literally means to be dragged away from a reference point." Martha is being bombarded with too much to

do; no wonder she yearns for Mary's help. It is distraction, not doing, that undoes Martha.

4. Jesus, as Martha's sister has already realized, has come to cut through our distractions, to defend us from all that would assail us – including our distraction-induced anxiety. Mary has caught a glimpse of what Martha is only just beginning to realize: Jesus is not simply a guest to welcome, no matter how honored. Jesus, wherever he goes, no matter whose house he's in, is now the host. Invited in by Martha, he now invites Mary and Martha to sit and learn. To be still. Not because stillness is always better than action, but because to be in Jesus' presence is to receive the welcome for which we have always yearned. And with the welcome, rest. Once you recognize Jesus for who he is, how can you not stop in his presence?
5. This week, people around the world have seen the creation around us more clearly than ever before, thanks to images captured by the James Webb Space Telescope. From cosmic cliffs to dying stars to Jupiter like we've never seen it, we are seeing the cosmos in its awe-inspiring beauty and perspective-shifting vastness like never before. Who wouldn't stop what they're doing, at least for a few minutes, to gaze in wonder at the wonders of the universe around us? Such images stop us in our tracks.
6. This is what happens to Mary and what could happen to Martha. For into their living room has walked not just another guest but the very fullness of God. Right there in front of them, plain as day, sits the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," the One through whom and for whom everything was created. Mary and Martha, galaxies and nebulae, even you and me. He was before us all, and in him – God made visible – is everything held together. He holds us even as he holds the stars in their courses. In grace has he appeared to us, revealing God to us. It was clear to Mary that day and would be clearer still in the most detailed image of love ever seen: Christ on

his cross, God dying that we and this whole dying universe would live. Jesus cuts through all that distracts; pulls us back from all that would drag us from God; that in him we might focus. In our doing and in our being; in our worship and in our service. In all things, that we might live our lives focused on Christ.

7. It is no mistake that this episode follows immediately on the heels of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells a story to rebuke the religious for failing to serve, only to commend Mary's faithfulness while inviting Martha to stop serving for a moment. Worship and service are not opposed to one another; they are different ways of loving God and neighbor. As the preacher Fred Craddock writes, "If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be Yes." Indeed. The distinction, finally, is not between serving or sitting; it is between Jesus and not-Jesus. He has come to us, inviting us to sit at his feet and listen, calling us to see him in our neighbor's needs. Distraction casts aside, focused on Christ, we are free to do both.
  
8. Today, with Mary (and Martha, too, I think) we sit at Jesus' feet and behold the Word made flesh, the same Word through whom the cosmos came into being. But not only do we see Christ; he sees us. Returns our gaze. Looks on the best of us with love. Sees us for who we are and loves us anyway. You have Jesus' undivided attention. In the midst of this vast universe, Jesus comes to you today. Sets a table for you. A little flour, a little wine, the feast of the new creation. Set your distractions aside and spend some time at the feet of Jesus, for he is the One we truly need. Grace upon grace, he meets our need and gives himself to us. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.