

# Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11), Year C

## The Text: Luke 10:38-42

It's just ten minutes to go until 1 o'clock, when your guests are due to arrive for lunch after church. As soon as you got home you put the chook in the oven. You've fried some shallots and plums together to make a sauce that even the judges of Masterchef would be proud of. You've peeled the pumpkin, carrots and spuds and you can hear the olive oil sizzling and the aroma of their roasting wafts throughout the house. The asparagus and broccoli are sitting in a jug ready to microwave, which you plan to do right after you finish heating the milk for the custard. So far so good. You take a deep breath and smile to yourself. Finally, everything is under control...

But then the shrieking of the smoke detector tells you that all is not well. You have that sinking feeling inside as you turn and see a blue cloud enveloping the kitchen. You've forgotten all about the garlic bread under the grill! You pull out the griller tray. The slices of bread have become volcanic rocks. Not good really...a bit darker than the golden-brown you had pictured. You get another French stick out of the freezer and try and crack it in half to fit in the microwave. After precious minutes have elapsed, you manage to succeed. You push the '1 minute' button. The minute seems like half an hour. The microwave beeps. You pull out the French stick and try to slice it. It's shrunk. Gone tough. Rubbery. You figure that you'll just let the other half defrost naturally and slice it up later. Problem is, in this weather, that'll take longer than normal. So while you're waiting, you check the roast. You're dismayed to find that you forgot to turn the veggies and they're stuck to the bottom of the pan and to each other with a black sheet of molten lava. And suddenly, you remember what you were doing when all this happened...the milk for the custard! You go and stir it and find burnt sugar from the milk throughout the whole lot. You're going to have to throw it out and start all over again. And just at that moment, the doorbell rings. Great! If only somebody else in the house could give you some help!

Ever been in that situation? Then you can probably empathise with Martha in today's Gospel reading. So why is it that Jesus corrects Martha? "Isn't she doing a good thing? Hasn't she welcomed Jesus and received him as her honoured guest in her home? As part of that, she is serving him by preparing a meal for him. What's wrong with that?"

Jesus doesn't correct Martha for her work of serving. Service and hospitality are special and required tasks of the people of God. Jesus' concern is not with Martha's serving, but with her meditation. And that's what today's text is all about: meditating on Jesus' word.

In today's text, both Mary and Martha are meditating: Mary is meditating on the teaching of Jesus but Martha is meditating on what she lacks. Martha laments that her sister is not helping her with the preparations for the meal and publicly voices such to

her guest: “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me alone to serve without any help?” Jesus’ response to Martha is gentle because he knows that Martha is trying to show her love. But nonetheless, he corrects her lament of Mary’s apparent idleness, by pointing out that she, Martha, is anxious and troubled by many things—but Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her.

What Jesus says needs to be seen in the broader context of table fellowship in Luke’s Gospel. In his commentary on Luke, Arthur Just notes that there are three elements to the theme of table fellowship: the presence of Jesus, a meal, and teaching. We see that most obviously in Jesus’ institution of Holy Communion, don’t we? Jesus is present with his disciples, around the Passover meal, and after taking bread and wine, he creates something new, teaching them: “This is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, do this in remembrance of me.” Just notes that when any missionary visited a village, the core part of hospitality shown to them was not the host preparing the meal, but for the family to sit and listen to their message. This is what Jesus is saying to Martha in our reading today: “Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her.”

Martha’s meditation on herself and on her problems have distracted her from what is most important: sitting at the feet of Jesus and being taught by him. And so Jesus shows that he does care, by pointing Martha to see that that is the one thing she does need. That this is the one thing needed by us on a daily basis would not raise too many objections. But often the issue for us is: “How the heck do I do it?”

We, like Martha, become distracted with many things, and don’t end up focusing on the one thing needed: Christ and his word. Often we have every good intention of starting the day by meditating on the Scriptures. But there’s the rush to get to work, or the kids ready for school. Or the phone rings. Or we remember an odd job that needs doing and we go off and do that. Or if we do actually get the time to read the Bible, we often don’t know where to start...and so, give up. Or we don’t understand what we read...and so, give up. Or we forget what we have read, and can’t get it to sink in. So despite our best intentions a daily plan of meditating on God’s word often ends up in frustration and guilt, and it seems easier to give it away.

Finding a space for meditation—a space where you know you will not be disturbed with the phone, or checking emails, or the TV, or answering questions from other family members—can help overcome many distractions to a daily meditational life. Setting and sticking to a time when we will not be disturbed also helps, as does setting realistic goals: spending one minute of meditating on God’s Word a day is better than none. Following a daily reading plan like the booklet produced by the LLL tract mission can help. And if we remember what we have read, and we understand it, well and good. If not...it doesn’t matter. I don’t understand how electricity works but I don’t need to in order to still receive the benefits from it. I don’t remember what I ate for tea two weeks ago, but it still did me good! On this, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

“In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to us for this day and for our Christian life...”

*"It is not necessary that we should get through the entire passage in one meditation. Often we shall have to stop with one sentence or even one word, because we have been gripped and arrested and cannot evade it any longer. Is not the word 'Father', or 'love', 'mercy', 'cross',... 'resurrection', often enough to fill far more than the brief period we have at our disposal?"<sup>1</sup>*

Meditating on single words or brief phrases can often be the most profitable. For example, the words from the two blind men sitting by the roadside in Matthew 20:30, who shouted out to Jesus: "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"—lead us to call on God for help—"Lord, I have no idea what to do—come and help me in my need!" These words of the blind men—the basis of the Lord have mercy in the liturgy—teach us that we too are beggars before Jesus with nothing to give to him, and that we are utterly at his mercy every minute of our lives. Bonhoeffer continues:

*"It is not necessary that we should discover new ideas in our meditation...It is sufficient if the Word, as we read and understand it, penetrates and dwells within us...so in meditation God's Word seeks to enter and remain with us. It strives to stir us, to work and operate in us, so that we shall not get away from it the whole day long. Then it will do its work in us, without our being conscious of it."*

Notice what Bonhoeffer says: "Then it will do its work in us, without our being conscious of it." The greatest reason why Jesus redirects Martha's focus—and ours—on the "only thing necessary"—the meditation on his word—is that Jesus' word is not just to teach us; to inform us intellectually—but *that it actually works in us*. It has been said that the Bible is the only book where the author is always present! Scripture itself teaches us this—In Hebrews 4:12-13, the writer says: "For **the Word of God** is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before **him** no creature is hidden..."

These words are from the RSV translation. Notice the text begins with the word of God, the Bible, and continues with 'him'. The writer is saying that whenever we read or hear God's word, the Bible, whenever we meditate on it, Jesus comes to us and fulfils the Mary/Martha reading for us. Whenever we open our Bibles, we open our homes to Jesus and invite him in. We show Jesus, the visiting missionary, the most appropriate hospitality by not preparing him a meal, but receiving him through his word and listening to him—at the kitchen table, the lounge room, your bedside cabinet, the hospital ward, your outdoor setting at the bottom of the garden...wherever you are meditating on the written word, the Word who became flesh, the Christ, is actually present. Can you see him? No. Does that mean he is not there? No. He is really present. In volume 35 of Luther's works, Luther wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together*, SCM Press Ltd, London (21<sup>st</sup> rev, 2005) page 62

*When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.<sup>2</sup>*

You don't need to understand what you read in your meditation on God's Word for Christ to be truly present to you. You don't need to remember what words of Scripture you meditated on for Christ to bless you and do you good. Through his Word, Jesus comes to you. He gives you his Holy Spirit. That was his promise in John 14 *"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."* The Holy Spirit works his holiness in us through Jesus' holy Word, as Jesus prayed in John 17: *"Father sanctify them in truth, your word is truth."* It is through Jesus and his word that God our Father works in us what is pleasing to him (Heb 13:20-21) and grows us in our salvation (1 Peter 2:2).

Let us be Mary's, choosing the one thing needed and sitting at the feet of our Lord daily, by opening our Bibles and meditating on his word. The greatest blessing is in what you will not see, but nonetheless the One who is truly there: your Lord and Saviour, really present, truly active, sharing his holiness, his life, his blessing with you.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>Luther, Martin *Luther's Works Volume 35 Word and Sacrament I*, Theodore Bachmann and Helmut Lehmann, eds, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1960, page 121.