

## “Curious Learning and Gracious Hospitality and...”

*Luke 10:38-42*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Loving God, when our anxiety hovers close, when fear clings to our bones, when our stress rises like the tide, see us. Speak to us. Call us by name. See us in the kitchen, in the classroom, in the hospital waiting room. Speak to us in the quiet, in the crowd, in the inky black of night. Call us beloved. Call us by name. Call us your child. Speak to us, for we cannot live on bread alone. Amen.

A recurring invitation throughout the Bible is to be like trees planted along rivers of living water, rooted in the nutritious soil of God’s love, joy and blessings, growing, expanding love, being hospitable to animals and plants, enduring storms, dancing in the wind, joyfully clapping leaf hands and producing abundant fruit expanding the sweet goodness of the cosmos. It is an invitation of and, and, and, of a multitude of ways to live, be, and thrive.

Science is learning that trees are communal beings, their roots connect with neighbors, they share nutrients, water, and information. Strong, healthy trees share, giving nutrients, water and space for sunlight for struggling trees. Trees work with fungi creating the wood wide web communicating over thousands of miles enabling them to defend themselves against insects that seek to destroy them, to coordinate when they drop seeds and the ideal time to let go of leaves. We are invited to be like trees each unique and living together in harmony, each growing and sharing, rooted in love, absorbing God’s living water and being hospitable to others, dancing with joy and graciously giving away fruit. We are invited to have commitment and love, meditation and works, growth and fruit. As seasons change, there are shifting rhythms. Jesus explains that discovering the unforced rhythms of life enables us to enjoy abundant life.

Another theme throughout the Bible is gracious hospitality. God is gracious and hospitable to everyone and each of us is commanded, and all of us as a community are commanded to be gracious and hospitable to everyone. There are numerous scriptures of gracious hospitality of shelter, food, and necessities to guests, and to neighbors, and to anyone in need, and to immigrants. There are male, female, and transgender stories of gracious hospitality.

Keep the context of scripture’s insistence on “and” and the command to be a gracious host as you listen to the gospel of Luke. **Luke 10:38 MSG “As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed Jesus and made him feel quite at home.”** Martha is celebrated for reflecting God’s gracious hospitality, like a tree providing shade and fruit. Keep scriptures affirmation of Martha’s gift of helping Jesus feel at home in your mind as you explore the “ands” of this scripture. **Luke 10:39 MSG “Martha had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word Jesus said.”** Mary is celebrated for curiosity, awe, wonder, learning, meditating like a tree absorbing living water and feasting upon nutritious soil.

Two verses, two ways of loving, two ways of expanding the goodness of the cosmos. Sometimes humanity struggles with “and” wanting to compare, to categorize, to rank, to order, to judge one way as superior to another.

Nonviolent communication seeks authentic connection by listening to understand others. Violent communication demands to be right, to win the argument, to control another which without nonviolent communication intermixed over time causes division and resentment. Martha’s initial intent was to be a gracious host and be a curious learner. Sometimes our love and desire for “and” does not manifest in

loving ways. Martha suddenly saw scarcity, scarcity of time, scarcity of hospitality help, and began to fear that she would not be able to be a gracious host and a curious listener. Instead of using “I” statements. I need help. I need to have time to be a curious listener. I am feeling upset. Martha uses “you” statements and seeks to control her sister. Luke continues. **Luke 10:40 MSG “Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. “Master, don’t you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand.”** Jesus was affirming both sisters but Martha longed to have her way of serving elevated as the best way.

Jesus responds: **Luke 10:41-42 MEV “Jesus answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed.”** What is the one thing? Probably the one thing involves a connection with God. And the one thing is different for each person. Each person connects with God in their own unique way. Each person receives love in unique ways. Each person loves in unique ways. Humanity gets a more complete connection with God when we share these connections.

In 1991, there was a movie entitled *City Slickers*. A wise gruff cowboy kept saying the secret to life is “one thing”. Through a series of mishaps and adventures many things are learned. The cowboy is repeatedly asked: “Is this the “one thing”?” The cowboy does not affirm any one insight for the cowboy realizes the “one thing” is to be discovered by each person. The “one thing” is different for each person. One might find the “one thing” by discovering what makes you tick, what excites you, where one of your joys meets a need of another. One might find the “one thing” by examining what gives you purpose and passion. One might find the “one thing” by walking in creation, being with trees. One might find the “one thing” by talking to others, by meditating on scripture, by worshiping God, perhaps in a church, perhaps in a space of wonder and mystery. Your “one thing” is probably how you connect with God. God is life, love, joy, hope, peace and every form of goodness. Discovering your “one thing” is a glorious moment. However, the glory is lost if one tries to force their “one thing” on another for your “one thing” will not fit on another. God created your “one thing” for you. God’s love is personal, honors, and celebrates the uniqueness of each person. Martha’s “one thing” is gracious hospitality. Mary’s “one thing” is curious learning.

Martha wants Jesus to force Mary to do Martha’s “one thing” instead of being true to Mary’s “one thing”. They are both good “one things”. This desire to control and force one’s “one thing” on another is rampant today, wanting another to believe the same religion, to have the same politics, to view the world through the same lens and on and on. Each person is unique. Violent communication seeks to be right, to win, to force one’s perspectives on others. Nonviolent communication seeks to listen, to understand different perspectives, to form authentic communication. Nonviolent communication often does not agree and is comfortable with diversity. Jesus concludes: **Luke 10:42 MEV “Mary has chosen a good part, which shall not be taken from her.”** Jesus is affirming both Mary and Martha’s “one thing”. Jesus is inviting us into a season when no one’s “one thing” is taken away from anyone, a season where all are free to be true to themselves, to discover the unique way God created them to be and live.

Bruce Metzger is a renowned Greek textually expert, Bible translator, Biblical scholar. and teacher. He has the Greek New Testament memorized. He studied numerous Greek manuscripts to help form a Greek New Testament and translated the Greek into English. Bruce devoted his life to learning and sharing the intended message of scripture. One day, he was a guest lecturer in our Greek class. The class was moved to the largest classroom and was packed. Bruce stressed the importance of learning the intent of scripture and communicating it in ways that reveal the intended insights. Bruce taught about our scripture today as an example of a scripture that some translations have a poor word choice, yielding misunderstanding, which is then extrapolated in ways that end up far from the original intent.

The New Revised Standard Version translates a Greek word that means “good” as “better”. The NRSV states: **Luke 10:42 “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”** For some this results in extrapolation that is in sharp contrast to the intent leading to judgement that Mary was better than Martha, that curious learning is better than gracious hospitality, that cooking is inferior women’s work. This poor word choice leads to binary thinking, division, and a desire to impose one’s way upon another. Misunderstanding of this scripture has fueled division in the church for centuries belittling the ministry of doers and elevating the ministry of meditation, dismissing works and affirming faith. Ugly judgment has been wielded on those who are not at church on Sunday, because they spend that time working for a loving world while those who worship at church are celebrated. Presbyterians tend to elevate head spirituality, learning, teaching, exploring while being skeptical of heart spirituality mystery, feelings, vision quests. Roman Catholics tend to elevate original sin, sacrifice, atonement while being skeptical of being created good, rest, grace. Let us stop this madness of judging. Let us celebrate both and the multitudes of ways to be with God.

Bruce explained how there is not an ideal English word for the Greek word used here. The concept is used elsewhere in scripture the good portion, the yeast, that permeates the bread and causes it to rise, the mustard seed that supernaturally grows into a great tree. Many translations use “a good portion”. The “a” communicates that there are several “good portions”. The NRSV uses “the” instead of “a” communicating that there is one better part. The choice of part instead of portion is problematic for in today’s English language part indicates more of a separation compared to portion being in connection. If one applies this skewed understanding to the previous sentence, sometimes one assumes the “one thing” is Mary’s curious learning leading one further and further away from the intended message. Bruce encouraged us to be tenacious in our study, meditation, and interpretation of scripture for this ministry is essential for all who seek God’s will through scripture.

Our scripture is a wonderful story of two sisters, who love God, love each other, and are striving to expand the goodness of the cosmos.

#### “Wildfire”

*a poem by Sarah Speed*

*I can picture it—salty sweat, accumulating in her bangs. The scent of toasted sesame seeds, crushed oregano, sumac, and cumin. Flour on her hands, painting streaks of white in her hair when she ties it back. The sweet date she samples—the way it stretches and clings to the back of her teeth, leaving the taste of honey in her mouth. I can picture Martha in that kitchen, plating meals, eager to see their eyes close. Their heads nod. To hear the swell of approval that rises from their lips. And I can picture her sister. Brows scrunched. Fingers fidgeting, wishing for a pen, for paper, for a way to write it down. I can see her mouth part like a fish in the air, questions forming and reforming on her curious lips. I can see her lean in, knees tucked, eyes bright. I can see her imagining the world Jesus dreamed of. And I can picture how, for generations, this story of two brazen women in scripture, a story of two women so close to Jesus, may have felt like an untamed wildfire. I can picture the way we put these women in boxes. I can imagine how people saw their full hearts, their untamed energy, and decided to label that as good and bad, better and worse. I can imagine how Martha’s questions were interpreted as nagging, or the interruption interpreted as needy. I can picture how it happened, but what if it was all more beautiful than that? What if these sisters discovered a ministry of cooking? What if they discovered the faithfulness of learning, the kind of friendship that allows you to ask questions, or something in between? I can imagine it. Can you?*

Pastor Lauren Wright Pittman writes. “In a world that feels polarized in just about every possible way, I find it difficult to discern my voice, and even more so at times, to align with God’s voice in the

midst of it all. Countless media outlets vie for allegiance, using shock and outrage to try and force people to pick a side or develop a stark all-or-nothing worldview. It is exhausting. The more I try to engage with this binary thinking, the more it all just kind of folds in on itself and falls apart. I long for a faith with nuance that honors the multiplicity and complexity that I experience in my life. I believe that God is in fact not contained by our categories or influenced by our dividers and walls. What would it look like to loosen our grip on our preconceived ideas, and approach our search for God with a 'beginner's mind'? What would it look like to learn from one another and to grow through mutual understanding without compromising what matters most? As we journey this Lent, from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday and everything in between, I hope we closely encounter God, get in tune with ourselves, and experience deeper connection with one another. Perhaps, we will be surprised by where we find God, and also where we find ourselves.”

“Both, Please”

*a poem by Sarah Speed*

*It is one thing to speak of love. It is another to hold a newborn in your arms, to sing someone to sleep, to lean down and listen for their breathing. It is one thing to speak of faith. It is another to press your forehead to the floor, to cry out in prayer, to ask the hard questions and still thank God for the meal. It is one thing to speak of the Divine. It is another to walk under a tunnel of wisteria, to stand barefoot at the edge of the sea, to hear the birds sing as the sun returns and whisper, Thank you, thank you, thank you. It is one thing and another, so I pray, Give me both, please. Show me both, please.*

You are invited to let go of comparisons made by the lens of your personality, let go of evaluating by the frame of your life, let go of holding up a measuring stick by your experiences to others. Let go of guilt, shame, blame, expectations. Let come your joy, peace, love, freedom. Let come affirmations of the goodness in others and affirmations of the goodness in yourself. Let come the grand glory of the cosmos and the goodness of all in the cosmos. God is inviting us to savor love in every form and celebrate goodness in every person. Amen