

Vacation Bible School always poses a little bit of a conundrum for me as a pastor. Because, on the one hand, I can't deny its value. For one week we get an influx of children and families through our doors like we rarely do any other time of the year. For one week, these kids learn God's Word through lessons and crafts and music. For one week, these kids are part of the body of Christ.

And the harsh reality is that many of them will never be a part of the Church like this any other time of the year. VBS has become a staple of American Christianity simply because so many people grow up knowing nothing else about the Church except VBS. It becomes their entry point into the faith and it becomes a reminder of what the Church can offer to their children once they become parents. And all that is well and good and a fulfillment of the Church's mission. There's just one little problem with it all...

It is a LOT of work. One week from now, roughly 3 dozen volunteers will sacrifice their evenings for five days of exhausting activities. Teaching Bible stories and doing crafts and playing games and singing songs and serving food. And that doesn't even include all the time spent in setting up and tearing down this yearly event.

And frankly, what we do here isn't really even that big of a VBS. Yes, we get a fair number of kids. Especially relative to the size of our congregation. But in terms of the amount of "production" that we put into this, it's actually not much. There are congregations who transform their entire building for VBS. Decorate every room until they're unrecognizable. Dress up in detailed costumes. Put on skits and puppet shows and all sorts of well-rehearsed theatrics. Whereas we toss some simple decorations on the wall, hand the leaders' guides to our volunteers, and say, "Whatever you can do is great."

And that's the conundrum that I face every year. How much energy can we put into VBS this year? How much energy should we put into VBS this year? What is the cost/benefit analysis of pouring hundreds of man-hours into a program that will only last one week? But which may, in fact, be a very important week. Or should I be looking at this in terms of cost/benefit? Should we pursue every opportunity with 100% fervor and let God figure out the costs and benefits? These are the questions that I ask myself.

I don't know if Martha, in our Gospel lesson, asked herself any of these questions consciously. But I think a similar debate is going on in the background of this text. Where do we draw the line between being lazy, disrespectful, and poor stewards of God's Kingdom and being anxious, troubled, and distracted, like Martha?

It's easy, in hindsight, to be hard on Martha here. I mean, after all, if one of you were to go back in time and have the opportunity to meet Jesus the way that these two sisters did, what would you do? Would you spend the entire time cooking and cleaning and decorating and fixing drinks and setting tables? And never spend one minute actually talking to your Lord?

I don't think so. I certainly wouldn't. I would go back, first of all, with a whole list of questions to ask. And then I probably wouldn't ever get around to asking any of them. Because, like Mary, I'd simply crumple at his feet and listen to him speak with my jaw hanging open. Eating up every word he said. Doing everything I could to write it down or commit it to memory.

So Martha's not the most sympathetic character to us. But think about it from her perspective. Jesus isn't just a great teacher to her. For one, he's also a celebrity. She knows she will probably never have anybody as famous in her home ever again. And two, Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are all good friends. They're described as such in John's Gospel.

So here she has a good friend coming to dinner. A friend who just happens to be wildly famous. And I think you'd probably put some effort into throwing a nice dinner party for him too. Martha isn't trying to be selfish, mean, or materialistic here. She's trying to be gracious and respectful and a good host to someone who most definitely deserves it.

That's her goal. Obviously, it wasn't the right goal or Jesus wouldn't have dressed her down in front of her sister. And obviously there's something we should learn from this whole incident or Luke wouldn't have included it in his Gospel. But what is it? Where has Martha gone wrong?

Well, first of all, I think it's a mistake to see Martha's desire to put on a good dinner as a sin. You'll notice, Jesus never tells her that's its wrong for her to serve him food. To be perfectly blunt, we ourselves gather together to have dinner with Jesus this very morning. We call it the sacrament of Holy Communion. And it takes a certain amount of effort to put that dinner on too. Just talk to the elders and altar guild.

So eating dinner with Jesus isn't a problem. It's actually a good and holy thing to do. Something he does time and time again with his disciples throughout the Gospels. No, the problem here is one of priorities. Martha has piled on things to make her distracted and anxious and troubled. And she has left at the bottom of the list the one thing out of all of them that is truly necessary: to hear God's Word.

That's what Jesus is offering her. A chance to hear God's Word from God's Word made flesh, dwelling right inside her house. To see God's glory in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. All those other things that Martha was doing? They were perfectly good things. But, number one, they weren't necessary. And, number two, they simply don't compare to the tremendous gift of hearing God say, "I forgive you."

Which is a lesson the Church needs to learn just as often as Martha needed to learn it. There are lots of things we as a Church can be doing. And many of them are good things. Things that show respect and honor and praise to our Lord. They are good and Godly things.

But they are not necessary things. Only one thing is necessary: to hear the Word of our Lord. That is the number one responsibility of every Christian. Of every member of this congregation. To keep that one thing at the top of every list of priorities.

And its not because we're going to hell if we don't. It's because we do have a time machine. We can crumple at Jesus' feet and listen slack jawed to every word from Jesus' mouth. Eating it up and committing it to memory and writing it down so that we don't forget a single word of it.

That's what Scripture is. It's a time machine provided by the Holy Spirit. So that we can sit right where Mary sat. And listen to our Savior's words with just as much love and devotion. And invite others to sit with us. Because if we've got this incredible opportunity, why wouldn't we want others to have it as well?

That's what Martha was missing out on with all these distractions and worries. But Jesus is still awfully hard on her. If putting on a dinner for him wasn't a sin, why was he so critical?

What you have to remember is that Martha did commit a sin here. But it wasn't the dinner. It was what she said about her sister. *"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."* If Martha wants to have her own priorities out of whack, if she wants to sacrifice the most valuable gift God could ever give her for the sake of cooking supper and washing dishes, if she wants to be a complete fool, that is, in a sense, her own choice to make.

But Jesus is not going to stand by and let Martha bully her sister into joining her in her foolishness. Mary has chosen the good portion. Don't you dare take that away from her. Mary has chosen to have the right priorities. She has chosen to strip away everything that is unnecessary and focus on this one thing. And that may blow your mind. But you will not stop her.

That's a lesson for us too. A lesson for us every time we look at someone else and say, "They don't have the same priorities as me. Therefore, they're wrong." "They don't value this ministry enough. Therefore, they're wrong." "They don't approach the mission of the Church the same way that I do. Therefore, they're wrong."

They do VBS differently from us. They do children's ministry different from us. They do evangelism in general different from us. So what? If Jesus is saying one thing here, its that we all need to worry about our own choices. Our own priorities. Our own time spent sitting at the feet of Jesus. Our own desire to bring all nations, even the little children, to him without hindering them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

And telling them about the God who chose the good portion for us. Who entered the homes of sinful people like Mary and Martha and ate with them. Who went to the cross for sinful people like you and me and died for them. Who did the one thing necessary for us. That we might welcome him into our homes, our hearts, and our lives forever. He did the one thing necessary for you. And no one can take that away from you. Amen.