

Pentecost 6C - July 21, 2019

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

“Needful Things” © - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Before I moved to Maine, I knew about Maine by way of Stephen King. His make-believe coastal town that features often in his stories and novels is “*Castle Rock*”, which is meant to reflect Midcoast and DownEast Maine. I have read 18 of King’s books, starting when I was about 14 years old. One of my all-time favorites is the book “*Needful Things*”. The title, I am quite certain, comes from our reading today, from the last verse, where the King James translates to “*But one thing is needful...*”.

In this story, Leland Gaunt comes to Castle Rock and opens up an antique store called *Needful Things*. Castle Rock is a typical small-town in the Northeast, made up of strong-willed, hard-working people who harbor strong opinions about their neighbors, and hold grudges for a long, long time. Before the arrival of Leland Gaunt, those opinions and grudges were held at bay by the other Northeast characteristic of letting people be who they are no matter how much it drives you nuts, and helping those same people when they most needed help. In the *Needful Things* shop, the residents of Castle Rock find the one thing they need to fulfill what they think will make their lives complete.

A boy finds a baseball card that reminds him of better days with his father. The town alcoholic finds his old letter jacket from when his life was perfect as a teenager. A woman finds a little Hummel statue that was her touchstone for security when her husband abused her. A pendant from ancient Egypt erased the pain of arthritis from a woman’s contorted hands. The price for all these objects was a little bit of money and the agreement to play a prank on somebody in the town.

It turns out that Castle Rock is consumed with worries and distractions about the other residents in the town. It also turns out that Leland Gaunt, the mysterious proprietor of *Needful Things*, is either Satan himself, or an agent of Hell, who knows the people in the town better than they know themselves. He plays everyone off each other until everything anxiously escalates into murderous chaos.

We are, it turns out, terrible at knowing what is most needed for ourselves and others when we make our decisions based on worry and distraction and anxiety. Right where we are most worried and distracted is where we can be most taken advantage of and manipulated to evil and un-neighborly ways.

Fortunately, things don’t go that far in our story today with Mary and Martha and Jesus. Distraction is mentioned twice in these 5 verses. Worry is combined with distraction in Jesus’ response to Martha.

Martha's intentions are very good. She invites Jesus and his followers into her house. The Greek here is accentuated, so Luke wants to emphasize that Martha 'very much welcomes' Jesus into her home. We don't know how many people are with Jesus. Is it the 70 we just finished with? If so, the hospitality Martha is extending is very great indeed, and would explain why she is upset with Mary. Martha, I imagine, would be a grumbling, angry mess if she were the sole person providing for 70 people.

Mary, in the meantime, is at Jesus' feet, listening to him speak about the Kingdom of God that is drawing near. Before we even get into what is said by each of our characters this morning, let's just note how radical this scene is already. First, this is Martha's house. That Martha owns a house in this deeply patriarchal world is remarkable. That Jesus accepts an invitation from a woman to dine in her home that she owns is also noteworthy and radical. Rabbis, and men in general, would never do this in ancient Israel. Second, Mary is clearly a disciple of Jesus' - that is what '*sitting at his feet*' means. It is the way to figuratively describe a disciple. This is unimaginable in this ancient culture.

These are profoundly revolutionary acts for Jesus and his disciples. The traditional roles and actions are being overthrown all over the place in Luke 10, and throughout Luke's Gospel. Without projecting our 21st century sensibilities backwards, just taking this scene in its day and age, Jewish people reading this would be shocked and stunned, as would those in the Roman empire, who were equally patriarchal.

This is what Martha has welcomed into her house. It is a loaded situation. Now, on top of all that, throw in worry and distraction and the needful things required to make Martha feel like the situation is under control multiply very quickly. Needful things arise very quickly when we are worried and distracted.

Worry is a constant concern about outcomes we cannot control but want to control, and distraction is only a concern when there is actually something important to focus on. When both are present, we often spiral it up into anxiety. Martha is losing control of her kitchen, which is jeopardizing her ability to fulfill the unspoken requirements of hospitality, but she can't focus on the kitchen because she is distracted by her sister, who is out there listening to Jesus.

Worry and distraction are great tricks of the mind to make us believe what is most important, most needed are things born of the anxiety worry and distraction produce. So while the gender roles and the challenges to them are important to our understanding of the story, getting hung up there and talking about Mary people and Martha people is actually a distraction so we can worry about our particular roles in this day and age. This

is a story about how all of us get caught up in worries and distractions that make us lose focus of the most important thing. Once we give into the worries and distractions, we now make choices that make us very acceptable clients at Leland Gaunt's little antique store in Castle Rock, Maine.

Martha's worry, distraction, and anxiety revolve around three concerns: performance, presence, and presentation.

Martha has a lot to do in the kitchen. As we have seen in the last three weeks, hospitality is a huge deal in the ancient world, and how we enact and receive hospitality matters greatly. Last week, we heard Jesus tell the lawyer to "*Go and do likewise*", to go out into the world and perform acts of mercy in the same way the Samaritan did for the man on the side of the road. Performance is all about *doing*.

But when the doing of things, the performing of actions, are consumed with worry, distraction and anxiety, they no longer serve God; they serve the worries and the distractions. Martha's performance in the service of hospitality and especially in the service of God has been seriously compromised because now her work is tied up in all her worry and distraction about her sister.

Some of us come into the presence of the Lord with our work and performance. Some of us come into the presence of the Lord with our reflection, listening, and meditation. This is how we understand our *being* with God. Presence is all about *being*.

When our very being is compromised by worry and distraction, it doesn't matter if you are a "Mary" or a "Martha", you are vulnerable to being led astray. We tell people what to do. We want them to behave, according to our moral or cultural code. We challenge their very being by calling them out, either in gossip or directly, perhaps in a group of people.

What we see in other people and in situations changes depending on whether we are seeing from the eyes of Christ or from the perspective of worry and distraction. The presentation of things is highly dependent on how we see ourselves, and what we think other people are doing. How the world is presenting itself to us, its presentation, is all about our *seeing*.

Martha's seeing is skewed by worry and distraction. Martha sees her sister not working when she should be, and Martha sees herself as the one doing all the work, the one who doesn't get to be with Jesus. Martha is *the one*.

It is so difficult to come back to ourselves when we are consumed with worry and distraction. In Chapter 12, Jesus asks the disciples a great question. We should all ask

ourselves this Jesus question. “*And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?*” (12:25-26).

In Stephen King’s story, *Needful Things*, the only thing that brings the town back to itself is realizing that they have been manipulated and used. Their worries and distractions have been used against them in order to fulfill the desires of chaos and destruction. The community’s ability to perform acts of neighborliness and hospitality - doing things, their ability to be in each other’s presence regardless of whatever petty thing they had with one another - being together, and how they presented themselves to one another - how they saw each other and wanted to be seen by others - all of this had been undermined by Leland Gaunt using their worry, distraction, and anxiety against them.

It is not that Martha is doing wrong things in the kitchen. Jesus doesn’t reprimand her. Instead, Jesus affirms Mary. Mary is performing the non-anxious task of listening. Mary is in the presence of the Lord. Mary is seeing clearly and the world therefore is presenting itself clearly to her. Mary has chosen the better part.

And when we choose the better part of our doing, being, and seeing, we begin to realize how much at the mercy of the forces of morality, culture, politics, powers and principalities we have been. It may be that even serving the Lord is not the most important thing, especially when that service is consumed with worry and distraction. As Dr. Len Sweet says, *God desires and prizes something more from you than your service. God longs for your love.*

Indeed, God performs acts of love with and through us. God wishes us to be continually in the presence of God’s love. And God wishes to present a world that is shimmering with love and beauty to us at all times.

So let us set aside our worries and distractions, and instead come into the presence of the Lord, whether it is in our kitchen or our living room.

Amen