

What Do We Really Need?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, July 19, 1992. Scripture Lesson: Luke 10:38-42.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Even a superficial glance at newspapers or magazines shows us that tension and disharmony exist between many men and women. We see increased incidence of divorce which nearly always hits women ^{both men} ^{emotionally} harder economically than men. Each year we see increasing numbers of boys and men fathering children and never taking responsibility for them. I've stood beside women in hospitals at two in the morning who've been battered by their husbands. We live in a world where many men don't believe a women really means it when she says, "No!". We live in a society that finds many more women in the work force, most of them out of economic necessity, and most of them earning less than there male counterparts. We live in a society that includes more and more single women and more single women as heads of households.

→ It would take an incredibly insensitive preacher to read our Gospel lesson without relating it to the role of women in American society. When you think of the role assigned to women in Jewish and pagan society in the days of Jesus I'm pretty convinced that Jesus was incredibly liberal in the way he related to women. Unfortunately, that liberal attitude of Jesus was lost by the church quite early in its history. Even today it's hard for a lot of Christians to hear the voice of Jesus as it relates to women.


That's not to say that Jesus would endorse everything that's labeled liberal. ←
We know that he had an extremely conservative view of divorce. According to St.

Mark, Jesus didn't allow it for any reason. Since only men could usually divorce in those days, even his view on divorce was an expression of his concern for women who were thrown aside by men

Jesus also had a conservative view of the seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery". He said that if a man even looks at a woman lustfully he's already committed adultery. By saying that he not only condemned the physical act of adultery, he condemned the exploitation of both men and women by the profitable pornography and advertising industry. So his harsh and conservative teaching on adultery was actually in support of his liberal attitude toward women.

Luke tells us that as Jesus and his disciples continued on their journey to Jerusalem, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

1. Imagine how Martha felt as Mary sat at the feet of Jesus. In those days

it was the role of *women* to fix the meals. It was the role of *men* to sit at the feet of rabbis and learn.  To sit at someone's feet" in the United States conjures memories of childhood, sitting on the floor while your mom or dad read a story to you. But for a first century Jew, "sitting at someone's feet" was an act symbolizing higher level formal education (Besancon-Spencer). Sitting at a rabbi's feet was a position typical of rabbinical students. The apostle Paul tells us that he studied *at the feet* of Gamaliel, the leading rabbi of his day. So Luke is telling us that Mary got it into her head that she, a woman, could be a rabbinical student.

But this was something women weren't allowed to do in those days. There was a saying going around in those days. "It's better for the Torah (the Law of God) to be burned than to teach it to a woman. It's better to teach a woman lasciviousness (sexual immorality) than to teach her the Law of God."

If Jesus had wanted to teach role restrictions, this would have been the ideal opportunity. He could have said, "Mary, you must go and help Martha. It's inappropriate for you to be here with the men. I'll teach your brother Lazarus, and then he'll pass on to you what you need to know." Yet Jesus did the opposite. Mary, he said, "has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

This is personally meaningful to me because my parents had four children: two boys, Ed and myself, and two girls, Mary and Levirt. My brother and I got mostly C's in school. But we were encouraged to dream of being whatever we wanted to be. My brother went on to become Adjutant General of Delaware. I went on to college and seminary.

My sisters, on the other hand, got straight A's in school (which they never let me forget). They were both on the honor society. Both sisters loved reading. My oldest sister wrote moving poetry. My other sister has read more theology and knows the Bible better than most seminary graduates. But my parents told my sisters that their place was in the kitchen and so they both got married right out of high school at the age of 17 and 18.

And I've often wondered, What if my father had encouraged my sisters as Jesus encouraged Mary, "Mary, you have a fine mind and have shown a lot of

interest in the Bible and Christian service. You could be whatever you want to be.” And what if he had said to my other sister, “Sissie, you really are a good writer. You could be a great poet if you put your mind to it.”

Let me encourage you parents not to discourage your daughters if they have an interest in what is traditionally considered men’s work. And, on the other hand, if your sons show an interest in what is traditionally considered women’s work. Don’t discourage them. Encourage them to seek God’s will. Exhort them to do, whatever they do, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. But there’s another lesson in this passage for all of us. While Mary sits at the Lord’s feet hearing his words, Martha is hard at work. More than that, she’s overburdened and mentally distracted by her many tasks. Martha was stressed out and at the point of burn out. And Jesus says to her, “Martha, Martha, you are *worried and distracted* by many things; there is need of only one thing.”

Now some people think that Jesus was simply telling Martha that she shouldn’t worry about preparing a five course dinner. “Only one thing is needed, Martha. Hot-dogs will be fine. We don’t need anything else.” Whatever Jesus meant I think it’s clear that the Word of God and not food is the one thing needful. We don’t live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

We can get worn to a frazzle working for peace and social justice and civil rights. We can burn out in our community involvement and fund raising and rebuilding activities. In the past several months I’ve heard elders and deacons and

others say how tired they are with all the special meetings and all the added work we've had to do to rebuild our church. People in our church are getting burned out.

Jesus wants us to know that social activism and community service can wear us to a frazzle if we don't take time to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his word. That is the one thing that's needed. When we don't sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his word we can lose the true reason for our work and our work itself will suffer.

Let me just close with a personal word. I love to talk with people. I love to listen to people share with me their thoughts and ideas. And I love to argue my *point of view*. I also love to listen to the radio and read the newspapers. ~~The first thing I do when I get up in the morning is turn on the radio to see if the world is still here.~~ And later I've got to have a newspaper. But what I really need more than anything else... even when I don't feel that need... is to sit at the feet of Christ and hear his Word.

Let me suggest that the same is true of you. I know we all feel that we have so many needs. But what we really need is not more money or a bigger house or different children or another wife or husband; and what we need most as a church is to sit at the feet of Christ and hear what God has to say to us about our purpose in life; about our families; about our priorities; about the mission of our church; and the need of the world.

Let us pray: