

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

Fairly often deep theological moments can come from the most unexpected places. I'm not really sure why it happens that way, I think it's because when we aren't working so hard to figure out everything, God finds a way to surprise us by jumping into the story and help us see something we may never have otherwise understood.

For example, no one ever watched the movie *City Slickers* expecting a life-changing revelation. Yes, you heard me right, the 1991 movie, headlined by Billy Crystal, has this deeply philosophical – and I would argue theological – moment. If you remember the movie, you might already know where I'm heading with this.

For those of you who don't have that movie filed away in your easily accessed memories, I'll give you the briefest set up I can do. The story is about a 39-year-old husband and father named Mitch who decides he needs an adventure. Frustrated with his life in New York City, he gets his two best friends to join a cattle drive for 2 weeks. They join a group of other "tourists" and cowboys to move a herd of cattle from New Mexico to Colorado. The drive is led by Curly – an old, grizzled cowboy played by Jack Palance (who won an Oscar for the role).

The entire experience is filled with revelations and challenges as they analyze their life and everything they've done and want to do, but one of the most poignant moments is when Curly and Mitch are riding by themselves. Curly accurately diagnoses Mitch's "mid-life" crisis (which is how the movie frames the story – not that I want to consider that I'm over 12 years past mid-life).

Curly explains it to Mitch this way... "You spend about 50 weeks a year getting knots in your rope, then you come here hoping 2 weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it. Do you know what the secret of life is?"

"No, what?" Mitch answers.

"This..." (*holds up finger*)

"You're finger?!?!?"

"Just one thing."

"That's great, but what's the one thing?" Mitch replies.

"That's what you gotta figure out." Curly tells him.

I can't really do it justice, because I can't do a good Jack Palance or Billy Crystal impersonation, and I can't say some of the words Curly says in a sermon. But the point still stands. Curly, the wily old cowboy offers life-changing advice to the young city slicker who goes through the rest of the movie trying to figure out what his "one thing" is.

There's wisdom in recognizing how the complexities of life today can make it really hard to figure out what is most important. There's wisdom in this Hollywood-created parable about how important purpose can be – about what it means to understand where your focus should be.

Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha as he continues his journey to Jerusalem. We have to be careful when we hear those names because we know very little about these two women. This is the only place they show up in Luke's narrative. Now it could be that they are the same Mary and Martha that John includes in his story about Lazarus – maybe. But we don't know that to be true. Luke certainly isn't telling that story of a miraculous resuscitation and all that it meant for Lazarus and his sisters, he simply wants to tell the story of an encounter with Jesus – an encounter between a teacher and his students.

And both of them are students, both of them are engaged with Jesus but in very different ways. The way the story is told and how the story is interpreted does a good job of making this into a conflict between the two sisters. Maybe it's because we are quick to find an argument between siblings. I know that my brother and I excelled at finding ways to disagree.

But in doing so, we risk misinterpreting Jesus. We risk not seeing how he redirects Martha. We might assume he's lifting up Mary at Martha's expense instead of seeing how he lifts up both women, and both ways they choose to receive Jesus.

Because what Martha does is holy. Bishop Gohl regularly uses the phrase "holy hospitality" when he talks about traveling around the synod for different occasions. Receiving someone into your home, or place of worship, requires a whole host of tasks that make your visitor feel welcome. The story of Abraham and Sarah receiving visitors by the oaks of Mamre is entirely about entertaining God when we entertain guests. It's included in today's readings to remind us that caring for a visitor is a part of experiencing God. That story of Abraham and Sarah is a foundational story in 1st century life – it's a part of their cultural fabric. Martha's acts of service are not the problem. Martha's work are good works done for the glory of God in her presence, according to the tradition of her ancestors.

The problem is that she loses sight of what she's doing and why she's doing it because she is distracted by her sister. The problem is she starts paying more attention to

what her sister **isn't** doing.

I'm going to throw out an unfounded assumption that Martha is the older sister of the two. Because I know, as a younger sibling, that this is how it works. The older sibling does all the work while the younger gets away with everything.

So often we frame this story as a conflict between what the two sisters do. We get sucked into conflict because it's how we look at the world. We want to prove one of them right and the other one wrong. And to be fair, Jesus' response seems to reinforce that, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Only one thing is needed...remember Curly's advice? But Jesus isn't saying that Martha's **service** is less than Mary's **studious listening**. It's not that Martha is wrong to work, it's that she got focused on her sister's apparent lack of effort instead of staying focused on Jesus.

Sometimes it's so much easier to get caught up in the mundane tasks of living a life of discipleship today, or running an organization – of being an institution in the modern world. Sometimes, or many times, we get caught up in comparing ourselves to one another and to other churches. Who's doing it right? Who has the right answer? How are they successful when we're "not"? What are they doing? What aren't they doing?

We get distracted by everything and everyone around us instead of remembering who we follow and what it means to sit at the feet of Jesus or serve in Jesus' name. We turn our life of discipleship into just one more rat race that we have to win by outperforming **them**.

We can probably all identify the times that we have acted just like Martha – not just busying ourselves with a lot of work but criticizing those who aren't doing enough. In doing so, we lose track of why we took on the work in the first place. We forget that we're offering hospitality to Jesus – in whatever form he takes. We get distracted, in all our busyness, from the one thing we're supposed to remember.

In *City Slickers*, Mitch has to overcome a mutiny, drive cattle through a torrential rain and raging river, saving a newborn calf in the process, just to figure out that his one thing is the family he left behind in New York. We know what our one thing is. It's the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It's the good news that we gather around every week so that we can be reminded that the work we do, the learning we do, is centered in Jesus; is

centered in God's love for us. Everything else is a distraction. Just. One. Thing. Amen.