

"Happiness consists in finding out precisely what the 'one thing necessary' may be in our lives and in gladly relinquishing all the rest. For then, by a divine paradox, we find that everything else is given us together with the one thing we needed."

~ Thomas Merton

We're all familiar with the passage: Luke 10:38-42. "Now as they went on their way, 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. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; **there is need of only one thing.** Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her."

It is not enough to identify the "one thing necessary" as Prayer, or even listening to Jesus, though they are both part of what I believe Jesus means here. Through the centuries, Christian writers have been more specific in identifying the "unum necessarium" as a capacity for union with God in quiet, trusting dependence ~ what the psalmist or Jeremiah might call "waiting on God" ("I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope." Ps. 130:5 and "The lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him." Lamentations 3:25).

A modern writer calls this kind of contemplative prayer "a spiritual art," a skill that it is not to be acquired, but rather realized or discovered, because God's indwelling Spirit makes it available to all believers. We need but to seek him with our soul and wait on him in silent trust, believing that God is indeed our "portion" and "salvation."

"Communion with God in the silence of the heart is a God-given capacity, like the rhododendron's capacity to flower, the fledgling's for flight, and the child's for self-forgetful abandon and joy...There are two contemplative practices of fundamental importance in the Christian tradition: the practice of stillness (also called meditation, still prayer, contemplative prayer, etc.) and the practice of watchfulness or awareness...Contemplative practice nurtures interior silence, teaches us the art of letting go, and helps us experience our struggles with greater clarity and balance." (Martin Laird, Into the Silent Land, Oxford university Press, 2006. pages 1,4,5)

Laird goes on to explain that the practice of silence or contemplative practice is not a technique: "A spiritual practice simply disposes us to allow something to take place. For example, a gardener does not actually grow plants. A gardener practices certain gardening skills that facilitate growth that is beyond the gardener's direct control. In a similar way, a sailor cannot produce the necessary wind that moves the boat. A sailor practices sailing skills that harvest the gift of wind that brings the sailor home, but there is nothing the sailor can do to make the wind blow. And so it is with contemplative practice, not a technique, but a skill. The skill required is interior silence." (ibid. pages 3,4)

I've been encouraged by the peace and presence God imparts even with fledgling attempts to practice stilling my soul to wait on the Lord. There may be other possibilities as to what the "one thing necessary" is, but for now, my efforts are concentrated on following God's invitation through the psalmist: "Be still, and know that I am God."(46;10) I usually prepare my heart for this stillness with a psalm such as this adaptation of Psalm 84 by Stephen Mitchell: ([A Book of Psalms](#) , Harper Perennial, 1993)

"Lord how beautiful you are;
how radiant the places you dwell in.
My soul yearns for your presence;
my whole body longs for your light.
Even the wren finds a house
and the sparrow a nest for herself.
Take me home, Lord;
guide me to the place of perfect repose.
Let me feel you always within me;
open my eyes to your love.
Happy are those who trust you
and merge their will in your will.
They let go of all desires
and give up everything they know,
until they finally enter
the inmost temple of the heart,
where there is no self, no other,
nothing, but only you."

Under God's Mercy,

Howie

Midweek Reflection # 14 ~ “Unum Necessarium”