

ONLY ONE THING
LUKE 10: 38-42

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
JULY 18, 2010
University Church Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

He is a feisty little man with a head of gray hair and a white beard. Notice the sharp contour of his jaw, the flashing eyes alert with ideas and questions and imagination. His wiry, thin body evinces the highly disciplined life he currently lives.

But it was not always so. When Paul and I were colleagues decades ago, when our friendship was at its zenith, he was living an undisciplined life of experimentation with drugs and sex and alcohol. One of the most intellectually astute people I have ever known—Paul achieved three doctorates from the University of Chicago and Yale University before he was thirty years old—in the 1960s and 1970s he was cutting a wide swath through Kansas City. An ordained Methodist minister and a professor of theology, he divorced his wife and left his five children. So capable as a writer and lecturer that the administration of the seminary chose to ignore his profligate lifestyle, Paul wandered with abandon.

Those of us who loved him in spite of his peccadilloes probably—undoubtedly—enabled him as he plunged deeper into a moral abyss. He wrote and preached and inspired and offered honest friendship and intellectual and spiritual searching. He was an inspiring if difficult man to know.

Then, came a slow turnaround. Nothing dramatic or earth-shattering. Just a turn in his spiritual journey that led him down a different path. His reading and searching led him toward Roman Catholicism. With its long tradition of scholars like Augustine and Anselm and Aquinas, with its liturgy forged out over centuries of practice, with its rich music composed by Bach and Beethoven and Mozart, the Catholic Church offered Paul a grounding he had never before found. He began attending Sunday mass in a nearby church, then daily mass, then engaging in long, difficult discussions with Catholic priests and professors—none of whom was his intellectual equal.

In the summer of 1976, he took a three-month sabbatical and went to a Trappist monastery in Colorado. Typically for him, Paul plunged into the quiet, intense life of the priests and brothers—repairing fences, milking cows, taking care of daily chores while reading and praying and contemplating. He wrote in his journal, “What does it all mean? I remember Bonhoeffer. One becomes a Christian when he/she first begins reading Scripture with the pronoun ‘we’ and thus ‘I.’ It was I who passed unharmed through the Red Sea, yet in the desert made golden images.”

On Wednesday, June 28, 1976, Paul found the day for which he had been waiting for a long time. He wrote, “I have no way of knowing if it will last, or what if any will be its implications. I simply know that in a deep sense this day was an answer.” During the celebration of the Eucharist early that morning, at the moment of Communion, he prayed, “Lord, show me a sign, that somehow I may experience your presence, no longer as hope but as fact.” He knew liturgy, practice, prayer discipline—all of these he could do and find meaningful, but there was “a hollow

center,” for they did not rest on a “givenness” of experience on the basis of which one builds a life of risk.

He prayed, “Thou who hast the world in your hand, who in this moment hast come as companion, I thank you without adequate praise to tell you—thank you for. . .” And words flowed—friends, mountains, Christ, streams, cities, mistakes, craving, on and on. But most important, Paul knew this to be the “sign.” Nothing huge, nothing shattering. “Just a quiet knowing beyond knowledge *that I was on the other side.*”

Although he was an ordained clergyman with impeccable credentials, he now can discern that at that point in his life—before he moved quietly to the other side—he was “a functioning atheist.” Now Paul lives in a hermitage he built in the Missouri Ozarks and continues to write. He lives a life of silence, a radical turn for a radical of the city but one to which he knows God has called him.

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Take a moment to look at this beautiful woman. See how she sits straight and tall and proud, how her deep brown eyes and her white hair draw you into her orbit. One almost immediately senses her innate dignity, her deep spirituality, her calm certainty that God is leading, that God is at work in her quest.

But it was not always so for Laura. When we first met, she was a ravaged human being—gaunt, lifeless with matted hair and vacant eyes. Like Mary in today’s Gospel lection and like my friend Paul, she needed only one thing—except she did not yet know what it was. When Laura wandered into Faith Methodist Church on a cold Sunday morning, she was making her living as a call girl. She was part of a North Shore ring of women who were managed by an upscale, aristocratic Lake Forest matron. Because of her beauty and regal bearing, Laura had graduated from turning tricks in cheap hotels in Waukegan and North Chicago with sailors from Great Lakes and soldiers from Fort Sheridan.

It was not the life she wanted, but it paid well and gave her some security of identity and even hope that she could some day save enough money to have an independent life. But she knew she was trapped and that someday her beauty would not be as appealing. By the time we met in Faith Church, Laura was already experiencing the angst of meaninglessness, the search that seemed to have no goal, the life that was spiraling into despair.

Beauty and vivacity and charm had become a curse for Laura by the time I knew her. Growing up in a modest home in which values were hardly ever discussed and verbal abuse by her parents was the order of the day, Laura sought early on the company of men she could charm and who would offer her approval and appreciation.

The trouble was that those men appreciated her laughter and charm and beauty without ever looking beneath the surface. They wanted to use her, and in her insecurity and uncertainty, she responded as a kind of sexual automaton. A brief, unhappy teenage marriage had devastated her, and that one was followed by another fling, marriage, divorce. She wanted something more and one day a friend told her about her own search for meaning. D. T. Niles once defined evangelism as “one beggar telling another beggar where to get food,” and that was precisely what happened when Laura’s friend advised her to try Faith Church, Waukegan.

When she almost literally stumbled up the steep steps of the church on that cold Advent morning, Laura was as uncertain of religion as she was certain that she wanted to change. The “good, Christian” people she had known were hypocritical, judgmental, arrogant and self-righteous—not the kind of people who tried to follow Jesus but, rather, the kind who confused Christianity with Christendom, respectability with reward, faith with feeling and sentimentality.

Fred Craddock has written about those prefixes we so easily use, e.g., “postmodern” or “postChristian” to denote that we have moved beyond the old ways of thinking. The truth is that we, most of us, are an intellectual and spiritual combination of the pre-modern, the modern and the postmodern. A lot of us grew up in an era when it was expected that a good person went to church—at least occasionally—and paid lip service to the values and ideals of Christianity.

Now, if someone like Laura goes to the trouble of seeking a church, you can assume that that person is searching for meaning in her life, on a quest for more than respectability and community approval. So, when Laura came to Faith Church, she wanted out of a life of sexual promiscuity and spiritual vacuity. She did not know exactly what she was looking for but she knew what she had would never satisfy.

Laura is a perfect example of Kierkegaard’s three stages of life: the aesthetic stage in which one enjoys everything and cares for nothing, the stage in which pleasure is paramount; the ethical stage moves the seeker into a life of purpose, a life that finds itself by losing oneself; and finally the religious stage where one is in communion with God.

Laura is one of the few people I know who has attained that religious stage, a life of full commitment to Christ. Don’t ask me how because, although I was her pastor for six years and am still her friend, she calls it simply “a gift of God’s grace.”

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This man with the weather-beaten face who is dressed in jeans and boots and a work shirt has graying hair and a look of wonderment on his face. Willie Thomas is his name, and I have known him for many years. His story is one of searching for that “one more thing” since he was a little boy.

Willie grew up in Stamps, Arkansas, a small Southern town suffused with racism and fundamentalism and Republicanism. He left Stamps to join the U.S. Army in 1951. After basic

training at Fort McClellan, Alabama, he was sent to Korea where he spent what David Halberstam called “The Coldest Winter.” Even as severe as our winters are in Chicago, they do not begin to compare to Korea’s coldest season. At the age of seventeen, Willie was captured by the Chinese Communists and taken into China. There he underwent what became known as “brainwashing.”

Here was an innocent, poorly educated African American boy interrogated by the Communists, mentally tortured, half-starved, seeking something without having a clue what it was and susceptible to every idea shoved at him. Willie bought it all, became a Communist, disavowed America, became convinced that capitalism and democracy were evil and surrendered his Christian faith to atheism. But along the way some good things came to him: he met and married a beautiful Chinese woman, they had three bright children, he earned a master’s degree in history from Beijing University.

And then Willie began to question his questioners. As he studied and read and lived in an oppressive, regimented land, he began to see the other side of Communism. He made yet another turnaround in his thinking. He became a thorn in the side of the Chinese government and their educators. He argued with them and defended Western democracy. They took away his job and his privileges, shunned his family. The situation became more and more unbearable and Willie became increasingly adamant.

When the Communists kicked Willie and his family out, they ended up in Kansas City after a long, circuitous journey. He got a job as a printer at the *Kansas City Star*, but a Black man with a Chinese wife and three children of mixed heritage were not easily accepted on Independence Boulevard in Kansas City in 1963. So the editorial cartoonist of the *Star* and a good Methodist (well, that’s a redundancy, isn’t it?) contacted me and Willie and I—two refugees from Arkansas became good friends.

I was so impressed with Willie, his faith, his fortitude, his intelligence that I invited him to speak to a weekly assembly at St. Paul School of Theology. He got up in the chapel and told his story. He earned a standing ovation from the student body and most of the faculty. Except one faculty member who prided himself on being the most liberal of the group. He was furious that I would invite a Communist to speak in those sacred halls. He engineered a resolution through the faculty senate condemning me for my actions. We liberals get easily confused, don’t we?

Willie is now seventy-eight years old and owns the weekly newspaper back in Stamps, Arkansas. His children are grown and he and Meshi have six grandchildren who are scattered across the U.S. The major export of Stamps, Arkansas, is its high school graduates. Farming is no longer a Mom and Pop enterprise, and commerce is limited in a small, Southern town. So the kids leave. But Willie stays, prints and publishes and sings in the choir at the local Methodist Church—which, horror of horrors! Is now integrated.

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Mary was eager to be a disciple of Jesus, sitting as she did at His feet, spellbound by his words. We do not know how long she sat there when Martha reached the limits of her selfless tolerance

and interrupted their colloquy to ask if Jesus cared about the injustice his presence had caused. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

But Jesus answers her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."

Only one thing. He doesn't tell Martha and he doesn't tell us what that "one thing" is. Because, I think, that one thing is different for each of us. My three friends found, each in his or her own way, the one thing that mattered, and their lives took on new meaning.

Humility is the only posture that counts in God's Reign. When dinner was served at Mary and Martha's home later in the evening, that humble man from Galilee helped everyone there become a seeker after the one thing.