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# Title: The Church: A Community of Learners

Text: Luke 10:38-42; Psalm 16:5-6

Speaker: Pastor Chad Bresson

**Introduction** This morning we began a series on Incarnational Education. We considered Christ, Our Teacher come from heaven above to dwell among his people. Christ educates. We, the church, are learners completely dependent on the Teacher for life sustenance. Tonight, we consider what it means to be a community of learners as a church engaged in education from Christ. We are considering this topic as we look ahead toward the beginning of something new here at the Chapel. You've heard us talking about the Antioch School through BILD international. Hopefully, through the month of March, as we begin this new enterprise as a church we will also begin to grasp just why it is such an educational project is important here at the Chapel.

We began to answer this “why” question this morning. Man is in need of an education that comes from outside of himself. The church is in need of an education that comes from outside of herself. That kind of education with eternal life in view is only found in Christ, Our Teacher. Tonight we will focus on the same “why” question from a slightly different angle... that of the church, a community of learners who have been united to Christ as a new creation. Why is it important for the church to be involved in education? Why is it important for Clearcreek Chapel to be involved in education?

We kind of assume such a question most of the time here at the Chapel. Our mantra has been, at least for the 9 years I've been here at the Chapel, “right doctrine promotes right living” and its twin sister, “without right doctrine there is no right living”. Many, many times we have provided biblical support for such assertions. But as we approach the beginning of a new task, it is good again to tackle the “why” question, even as we assume it. After all, it's possible that we've gone too far in placing a premium on doctrine, right? I bring this up because it wasn't all that long ago that the senior pastor of a fairly large church in our area mentioned to me that Clearcreek Chapel is known around the Dayton area as a teaching church. “You guys have doctrine down”. In fact, I heard it again last week. Our reputation precedes us. And in the context of that comment, it wasn't all that difficult to discern that “teaching church” isn't necessarily the most preferred label. In the context of that conversation one might conclude that service-oriented, outreach, kingdom growth, relevance, and relational are to be preferred characteristics.

Such an attitude toward teaching and doctrine isn't all that uncommon in our evangelicalism today. There are calls for quote-unquote “a balanced approach” to church ministry, as if to be known as a “teaching church” is to assume that wisdom living and outreach are pursuits that are not emphasized or prized here at the Chapel. Shane Claiborne, a popular speaker and a proponent of what is called “new monasticism”, sums up the typical attitude toward teaching and doctrine: “religious doctrines just aren't very compelling, even if they're true”.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that there was a time in his life when he had been driven by “ideol-

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<sup>1</sup> Shane Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution*, (Grand Rapids, 2006), p. 28

ogy and theology, which isn't very sustainable, even if they're true".<sup>2</sup> IOW, ideology and theology are not enough to sustain the Christian life. Instead, Claiborne opts for what he calls "living out what Jesus taught"<sup>3</sup>, thus successfully pitting "what Jesus taught" over against "religious doctrines" and "theology". While his views would be out of sorts here at the Chapel, I would posit that they are typical of many churches around us.

## Crises in the Church

What is even more surely the case, rather than the problem being an American church that is too often more interested in theology and less interested in social action, the problem is that American Christians simply aren't interested in doctrine at all. There are many symptoms of this particular problem... too many to list, but I'll list some of the more obvious ones here: a crisis of orthodoxy (what we believe), a crisis of orthopraxy (how we practice what we believe), a crisis of church leadership, and a crisis of ecclesiology (what we believe about the definition and function of the church). And before we get too hoity-toity about how all of these things are so wrong about everyone out there, we must allow that there is a crisis in American Christianity of concern for justice and mercy or social responsibility. Is the answer for these crises to jettison doctrine and theology? We emphatically deny such a suggestion and this evening, just for a brief time, we are going to consider why such a suggestion does not comport with what the scriptures say about the primacy of teaching and preaching as a mandate for the church.

## Teaching and listening in the book of Luke

This morning we spent some time in the book of Luke and this evening I would like to return there, to continue following one of the key storylines in Luke presenting Christ as a Teacher, Wisdom Incarnate from heaven. Our main passage is found in Luke 10, but before we get there, I want to walk through the storyline we have been following in Luke and I want to highlight some passages in Luke that provide us with a little bit of background into our passage. We are going to string these together somewhat so that what Luke is getting at is a little more obvious to us, especially when we get to chapter 10.

The first few verses you'll remember from the sermon this morning. Notice the activities that are being highlighted by Luke.

Beginning in Luke chapter 4, verse 4, where Christ is being tempted of the devil, "And Jesus answered him, **"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'"** Then verse 15... after Christ is tempted in the wilderness, he returns to Galilee where "he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all." Chapter 4, verse 31: "he was teaching them on the Sabbath, and they were astonished at his teaching for his word possessed authority". Vs. 43 of that same chapter... "he said to them, **"I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose."**"<sup>44</sup> And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea. Chapter 5, verse 1: "On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret... verse 3... Getting into one of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 45

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 46

boats... he sat down and taught the people from the boat.” Over to Luke 8, verse 15, from the parable of the sower, “As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. Then verse 21, “he answered them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” Chapter 9 verse 34, on the mount of transfiguration, where Christ’s clothes become dazzling white, he confers with Moses and Elijah, the disciples see his glory, and the glory cloud descends on the mount... verse 34, “As he (Peter) was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.<sup>35</sup> And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”

And now, for our more immediate context this evening, we begin with Luke 10, verse 21: In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.<sup>22</sup> All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”<sup>23</sup> Then turning to the disciples he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!<sup>24</sup> For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”<sup>25</sup> And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”<sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”<sup>27</sup> And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

Now, down to Luke 10:38, our main passage for consideration for this evening: “As they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.<sup>39</sup> And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.<sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”<sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things,<sup>42</sup> but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”

What have we seen in this brief synopsis of one of Luke’s themes being developed in his description of Christ’s life and ministry to Theophilus?

- Hearing the word from Jesus is of utmost importance.
- Christ is a Teacher sent from God, teaching and preaching to large and small audiences alike. The crowds affirm that Christ teaches with authority.
- Special blessing is pronounced on those who hear the word of God and do it.
- There is a divine declaration draped in glory that God is pleased with his Son and his disciples are to listen to Him. On the mount of transfiguration, the Father affirms that Christ, the Son, \*is\* the authority.
- The gospel of the kingdom is the content of Christ’s life-changing, world-altering message.

There's much more going on in the passages that we read, but for our purposes, let's keep these things in mind as we consider the story of Mary, Martha and Jesus.

## **Mary, Martha, and Jesus**

This seems like a very straightforward story. It's a story that we all know from Sunday school. There are three characters in this story: Jesus, Martha, and Mary. Interestingly enough, only two of the characters actually speak in this story: Jesus and Martha. It is a conversation between Martha and Jesus, with Mary in the middle, so to speak. Jesus comes to town and goes to Martha's home. Presumably, this home is in Bethany, but Luke does not tell us. This is the same Mary and Martha who have a brother named Lazarus, one of Christ's closest friends who also had a home in Bethany, the same Lazarus who Christ raised from the dead. So this home is not a home that is unfamiliar to Jesus. Jesus knows these sisters well. I believe this familiarity plays into what happens in this story somewhat.

You know the story: While Martha makes preparations for an elaborate meal, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus... to the consternation of Martha. Martha points out the lack of help she is getting in the kitchen from her sister and Jesus rebukes her, saying Mary is doing the better thing. Jesus visits. Martha serves. Mary sits. Martha gets upset. Jesus rebukes Martha. End of story, right?

For our purposes this evening, we are not going to do this text complete justice; my aim this evening is merely to highlight what it looks like for the church to be a learning community. And we're going to focus primarily on the silent figure in this story, Mary, although the correction of Martha has much to say to us as well. There is juxtaposition between the two sisters here, but we are going to highlight Mary this evening, but make no mistake, Luke wants us to see contrast here between Mary and Martha.

## **Mary as learner**

The first thing we need to notice in this text is Mary's posture. Martha stands. But Mary does the unexpected. Mary sits at Christ's feet. As we have seen from this morning and our reading of the scripture this evening, Christ is the Teacher come from God. He educates as One having authority. And if we were to follow Luke's storyline a little more closely (and we don't have time this evening), we would notice that the entire book follows Christ's travels from Galilee to Jerusalem. Christ journeys from manger to Egypt to Nazareth to Jerusalem to Galilee to Jerusalem... and as he goes, he educates. He is teaching and preaching "the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 4:43). Some of his teaching is in front of large crowds, "pressing in to hear the Word of God" (Luke 5:1). Some of it is in dialogue with religious leaders who don't care much for Jesus. A lot of his education is for his disciples, 3 of whom see and hear the grand declaration on the mount of transfiguration. We come to chapter 10, and we find Mary sitting at Jesus' feet. The language suggests that Mary takes the initiative in seeking out Christ and putting herself in a position to learn from him. Were we familiar with Jewish custom, we would know that such a posture would have been scandalous. Most religious teachers refused to teach women. Their place was in the kitchen (and as a side note, the question has been asked if our plans for theological education include women... I believe it is passages like this that suggest indeed our plans must include women.)

The stereotypes are being erased by this Teacher come from God. This is the second scandalous idea posited in this chapter. Just a few verses up, a cocky Jewish lawyer was exhorted to view the gutter-dwelling Samaritan as his “neighbor” who he, according to the second greatest commandment, was to love. Here in this passage, it is not a Samaritan creating the outrage, it is a woman. She is the foil for an elitist education. This life-giving education is for any and all who would sit at his feet. Christ, in his proclamation of the good news of the kingdom, is turning their world upside down. Mary takes the posture of a disciple. Sitting at the feet of the Teacher is what disciples do. She is there to learn. She is there to be taught. She is there to receive an education from Wisdom Incarnate. She is there breaking stereotypes. The words of the apostle Paul come to mind, “neither male nor female” for (we) are “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

The second thing to note is that Mary listened to Christ’s teaching. In listening to Christ’s word at his feet, Mary is portrayed as one who is part of that “good soil, who, hearing the word, holds it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” It is Mary who is Christ’s “mother and my brothers” because she is one of “those who hears the word of God and does it.” This is what it looks like for those who heed the declaration of the Father on the mount of transfiguration, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” Mary indeed is listening to the Son, the Father’s Chosen One. She is a true disciple listening at the feet of the Son who has been validated by the Father. Unlike her sister, Mary has ignored the alternative education being pushed at her, and instead is being taught “by God himself” (Isaiah 54:13). And according to this passage, Mary is one who is “blessed” because “many prophets and kings desired...to hear what (she heard) and did not hear it.” Even Moses and Elijah were not able to see and hear what Mary has seen and heard. An education about the true nature of the good news, the coming of the kingdom, the identity of the Messiah, and even the scope of who my neighbor is something Moses and Elijah were not privy to.

We’ve noted Mary’s posture. She is sitting at Christ’s feet. We’ve noted her activity: she is listening to Christ, Teacher come from God. Mary sits at Christ’s feet where she gains a disciple’s education. We now called upon to note her belief and her desire. The third thing to consider from this passage is Christ’s words “one thing is necessary”. While we don’t hear this from Mary, we do hear from the lips of Christ about what it is that motivates Mary and what she believes to be true. She has acted on something from her beliefs and desires in her heart in placing herself at Christ’s feet. This is what it is: Mary knows Christ’s teaching is the one thing necessary for life in the kingdom of God that has come near (Luke 10:9). While Martha is anxious and troubled over many things, Mary is only concerned about one thing, the one thing that matters infinitely most. And he is speaking beyond Mary and Martha at this point. Mary has learned what was seemingly out of the grasp of the lawyer earlier in this passage. When Jesus tells the lawyer to “go and do likewise”, the questions remain: just who is it that could love the neighbor as the Samaritan did? Who is it that could really go and do likewise?<sup>4</sup> It would seem that the question, what must I do to inherit eternal life has only been partially answered. And indeed, that’s the case.

As we said this morning, Mary “gets it”. The lawyer asks, “what must I do to inherit eternal life” and Christ answers him according to his folly. Mary, however, understands what the

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Bryan Findlayson, *Jesus Visits Martha and Mary*, [Lectionary Bible Studies](#)

lawyer doesn't. The answer to "what must I do to inherit eternal life" is to park oneself at the feet of Jesus and hear his words. Nothing less than eternal life is at stake in listening to Christ.

It is in listening to Christ that Mary demonstrates what the greatest commandment looks like. While the Good Samaritan demonstrates what it is to love neighbor, Mary's listening to Christ at his feet manifestly displays what is to love God with all heart, soul, strength, and mind. And it further elucidates how it is possible for me to love my neighbor in the way that the Samaritan's example calls me to. How is it that I am going to answer the question "what must I do to inherit eternal life"? I sit at the feet of Jesus and listening to him as the "one (and only) thing necessary".

Mary understands the Incarnation of Education to be the source of life. Mary sits at Christ's feet and listens to him because it is only in this Teacher that comes from God that she will find life. Here it is at his feet that life is given meaning. Those pertinent questions of humanity: Who am I? Why am I here? What is it that will make me right with God? What is it that glorifies God? Only an education that comes from outside of ourselves, from the Teacher who now dwells with his people will we find the answers to those questions. Christ's good news is the one thing necessary for eternal life. All other education pales in comparison to this one thing, a life-giving education that can only be found at the feet of Jesus.

The fourth, and last thing we need to note about Mary in this passage is that she has chosen the good portion. Portion, as it is understood in the Old Testament, carries the idea of blessing, inheritance, and bountiful food. All of these ideas are found together in Psalm 16:5 and 6: "The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. <sup>6</sup>The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance." Mary understood that the teaching of Jesus not only gave her life, but also governed her desires. It is in Christ, the Creator-Teacher who now dwells among men, that Mary finds all of her sustenance and satisfaction.

This, of course, is in contrast to Martha, who is distracted by the affairs of this world. Martha (no pun intended) has no peace. Martha is not listening. Martha is speaking. Martha is self-absorbed. Martha has succumbed to the alternative educational system in having the audacity to tell the Teacher what to do... "here, let me educate you...about my sister." Martha is controlled by felt needs. Martha represents the wisdom of the world that asserts itself over against the Personified Wisdom come from heaven. Martha is too distracted and too busy, like Esau no less, to concern herself with eternal matters. Martha is anxious (the word "anxious" in this passage is the contrast to "portion"), not satisfied in Christ. Martha presumes that Christ needs fed, when in fact Christ expects nothing from her and is only concerned about feeding \*her\*. Martha must take her cue from Mary, prize the inheritance of eternal life above all, and park herself at the feet of Jesus.

There is one and only one thing necessary. Those words take us back to the temptation of Christ by the devil in Luke 4 verse 4: **man will not live by bread alone**. There is only one thing Mary needs to live. That's Christ. So Christ \*must\* be her portion. Mary hangs on every "word that proceeds from the mouth of God" Incarnate. She knows she must feed on Christ, the true bread from heaven, as her sustenance and satisfaction for all of life. Mary knows that the only hope for healing in her brokenness and fallenness is to sit at the feet of Jesus. Martha and her needs aren't even on the radar at this point... Mary sees and hears no

one but Christ. She is so convinced that it is Christ's teaching that is the one thing necessary that she forsakes all to sit at Christ's feet. Mary's posture and her listening speak of a learner who has taken up Sabbath rest in Christ, the source of all soul satisfaction. It is this satisfaction, this eternal life in Christ that will not (notice the future language here), that will not at any point in her future, be taken from her. At some point this Sabbath Rest, this parking herself at Jesus' feet, will be consummate, the Rest will be eternal and Christ will be her portion forever. Forever, Mary will sit at the feet of Jesus' and Christ will be her portion forever.

**Conclusion** Where do we find ourselves in this text? What does this have to do with the church as a community of learners?

First, if you have been paying attention (and you rushed home to find and trace the Teacher-Wisdom-Hearer storyline in Luke), you probably have noticed that I skipped over a key verse in Luke's unpacking of Christ the Wise Teacher come from God. Luke 6, beginning with verse 39: "He also told them a parable: "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? <sup>40</sup> A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher."

Notice the language. Luke sets us up, through the words of Christ, to highlight Mary's posture and in doing so, gives us a lesson in discipleship. "A disciple is not \*above\* his teacher..." Luke intentionally wants us to see Mary sitting \*below\* Jesus at his feet. We would do well to foster the humility of being \*below\* Jesus in the submission of our will, and indeed our teaching to His.

Second, service can become a distraction to the one thing necessary in our lives. The raging debate in this passage, part and parcel to the scandal of having a woman as a disciple at Christ's feet, is Christ's rebuke of Martha and seemingly her service. Christ's point is the same as that of the Father on the Mount of Transfiguration: to hear Him is of utmost importance. Christ's teaching, Christ's life-giving and life-sustaining words, takes primacy. The church must do whatever it takes to make sure that it finds itself at Jesus' feet. That's a hard swallow for our action oriented and service oriented Christianity. Christ's rebuke of Martha is politically incorrect for a church obsessed with service. While serving is important, it is listening to Christ's word, educating ourselves with Christ's gospel, that is infinitely more important. Our eternal destiny is wrapped up in this matter of how we prize Christ and His Word.

We must continually be asking ourselves: what do we as a church want and desire the most? Is it physical nourishment, as was the case with the 5000 who had been fed and wanted more bread? Is it service? Is it social justice? Or is it Christ and His Word through which we inherit eternal life? If we are to have life, we must come to Christ and ingest and digest the Bread from heaven. If we do that, then our service will follow. But the point Christ makes throughout the book of Luke is... there is no "doing" without first "hearing". And this "hearing is a perpetual endeavor. We want to see numerical growth. We want to see life change. We want to be a community of serving. We want to experience kingdom expansion. We want to reach Springboro, Miamisburg, Franklin, Mason, Xenia, Beavercreek, Lebanon, Dayton, and Cincinnati for Christ. But it is possible for service and outreach and relationship building to distract from the one thing necessary. We must see what Mary sees, we must believe what Mary believes... if we want all of this... if we want to inherit eternal

life, we must put ourselves at the feet of Jesus, be learners from the Teacher come from God, and make the Chosen One who has the one thing necessary our portion.

Third, we will be talking a lot in the coming weeks about leadership training. But we need to keep these kinds of verses front and center if we would understand our leadership and teaching in a biblical way. This is something of which I have to remind myself as well. Before we can be teachers, we must be learners. We must train ourselves to be learners. We must never presume, even as we preach and even as we teach, that we need not sit at the feet of Jesus. The incarnation of education, or us being like our Teacher come from God, begins and continues by sitting at the feet of Jesus... learning from him. How is it that we will emphasize teaching if we do not stop to study and learn at the feet of the Savior? In order to give wisdom to each other, we must first be given wisdom from above... and that kind of wisdom can only be found at the feet of Jesus in His Word.

Fourth, we must park ourselves at the feet of Jesus because it is there that true disciples can be found. Everyone is to participate in educating himself or herself at the feet of Jesus. This is a corporate church activity. This is something we do as a community. A voice has come from the glory cloud and beckons us: "This is my Son, my chosen One; listen to Him!" If we come after Christ, we will hear and obey his words in "taking up our cross daily and following him (Luke 9:23)". After all, whoever is ashamed of Christ \*and his words\*, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when Christ comes in his glory and the glory of the Father..." (Luke 9:26). Being a disciple means listening to Christ because it is only by hearing Christ through His word that we know what it means to actually follow Christ.

Fifth, we will take our place beside the feet of Jesus as a community because it is there that we find the one thing necessary to inherit eternal life: Christ himself. Christ is Himself the glorious content of the message that we found this morning in Luke 4:18 and 19: "good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, relief and freedom for those who are oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor." We sit at Christ's feet to hear those words, good news, liberty, sight, relief, and favor because this is what it means to inherit eternal life. The word "sitting", as it describes Mary in this passage, conveys the idea of perpetual sitting. Let us hear the good news of Christ's death and resurrection on my behalf and his righteousness imputed to me again, again, again, and again. Let us be perpetually learning and hearing the gospel.

If we would know what it means to be disciples who incarnate the gospel of grace to a fallen world in need of Christ, if we would know what it means to be disciples who bless each other and our communities with lives that adorn the gospel, if we would know what it means to be disciples who champion justice and mercy, we must perpetually find ourselves at Christ's feet listening to those words of eternal life. After all, if we are not hearing and listening to Christ's Word, how is it that we have good news, how is it that we have liberty, how is it that we have sight, how is it that we have relief, and how is it that we have God's favor in salvation to offer someone?

This is why it is ill-advised and indeed, really bad theology, to pit doctrine against following Jesus with our words and actions. This passage and many others not only suggest that doctrine and activity go hand in hand, but that doctrine, or IOW Christ's teaching, actually produces genuine activity. If one has genuine doctrine, there will be activity. If there is no doc-

trine, there is no genuine activity... the social action may sound religious, but in the end it is void of eternal significance.

And finally, we will sit at Christ's feet because it is there we find the ultimate nourishment for our souls. To be a community of learners is to prize Christ's teaching above all else because it is in Christ's teaching that we find true wisdom and meaning for life. Christ and his teaching are our portion. If we are to inherit eternal life, if we are to enjoy sustenance at Christ's banquet table, it must be through what we learn at the feet of Jesus. The one thing necessary is found in only One, the Chosen One. This is why the Father declares, "Listen to Him!" It is only in Christ that we find the Word that gives life and life most abundant. We do not live by bread alone... if at all. Our abundant life comes from Christ. We must feed on Him, the true Bread from heaven. Nothing else should satisfy us. Nothing else should distract us, as Martha was distracted, from sitting at Christ's feet. Rather than Clearcreek Chapel being known as a "teaching church", as good and as God-honoring as that is, may we be known as a "learning church."

Let us not allow "teaching" to eclipse "learning" for it is in learning at the feet of Christ we find Sabbath rest for our souls. This rest in Christ and His Word, is a perpetual activity. We teach and we preach from the Word and it there that we learn at the feet of the Creator-Teacher. We teach, we preach, we learn. We teach, we preach, we learn. That is our Sabbath rest. That is our portion. That is why we prize Christ above all else as the "one thing necessary." May we understand Psalm 16:5 and 6 as Luke, and Mary, and Christ do: "The LORD is our chosen portion and our cup; Christ holds our lot. <sup>6</sup>The lines have fallen for us in pleasant places; indeed, we have a beautiful inheritance."