

“There is Need of Only One Thing”

Baccalaureate Mass
Seattle University
June 10, 2006
Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

At this your Baccalaureate Mass I want to interpret the gospel you just heard on four levels. I want to suggest that with your Seattle University education you also can interpret not only any sacred text but any aspect of your experience on the same four levels.

It is the story, hopefully familiar to you, of Jesus coming to the house of two women, Martha and Mary, for dinner. Martha prepares the meal; Mary sits at the feet of Jesus in the living room listening to him. Martha complains about this. Jesus tells her she is anxious and busy “about many things, but there is need of only one thing, and Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.”

The first level of interpretation is the most common or popular one, it is the received tradition, the meaning that was given to us and which we grew up with. Call it the **accepted cultural interpretation**. In this version there are two ways of life: one active, pragmatic, doing; and the other contemplative, listening, prayerful. The latter—the life of prayer—is the better part: better to sit quietly listening at the feet of Jesus or in God’s presence, than to be bustling about doing good, getting things done, making things happen. The accepted cultural interpretation says the contemplative life is preferable, higher, than the active life. We grew up with this meaning and accepted the meaning that was given.

The second level of interpretation comes from applying your education to the same story. Call this level the **educated interpretation**. On this level we place the story in its sociological and religious context of first century Palestine. On this level we realize that, of course, Jesus did not arrive all alone bringing a bottle of wine for his hosts for a nice intimate, conversational dinner. He came with his group of disciples, the men he had gathered around him. From the sociology of the times we also know that there was in a Palestinian village house a women’s quarters, i.e. the area within the house where women remained and worked behind the scenes.

In the educated interpretation we realize, Mary has refused to remain within the women’s quarters and Jesus not only accepts but praises her for doing so because in him these traditional boundaries are superseded. Not only that, we also discover in this educated interpretation that by sitting at the feet of Jesus with the rest of his disciples Mary is told by Jesus that this shall not be taken from her, that he accepts her, a woman, as a disciple. The previous level is not destroyed but it is expanded, enriched, and becomes more challenging. This is what an education can do for any popular, accepted cultural views.

We don’t stop there. There are two more levels. On the third level, understanding this story as fully as we already do, we engage in an interpretation not from the outside as up till now, but from the inside, from our very lives, from the core of our existence, from our unique experience of Mystery. We allow our life itself to interpret the accepted and educated versions. Call this third level the **existential interpretation**.

On this level we might focus on Jesus’ words: “You are busy about many things, but there is need of only one thing, the better part, which if you choose it, shall not be taken away from you.” Now what might that mean existentially for me, what is the only one thing that is needed for me among the many possibles, how is it better, why is it that once found it can’t be taken away?

Only each one of us alone can carry out this probing for meaning on our own, in our existential way, for the only one thing that is needed and that is so good that it cannot be taken away.

An image, however, might help each of us do this. I walk around Green Lake a couple of times each week before dawn. It’s where I take my soul—rather than my dog—for a spin and where I do my thinking, although it feels more like my thinking does me. At this time of year there are many fishermen there. Just look at one: sitting patiently in his collapsible chair on the shore of the lake, thermos of coffee or whatever in hand, alert to a pole in a sprocket, pointing out to the lake, line, leader, hook, sinker, bobber, spinner, lure, worms, egg, rusty tackle box, large plastic pail for hoped-for fish, and always a huge net at the ready just in case Moby Dick the Whale should happen into Green Lake. We, fishing from the shore of the pool of the Mystery of our life, patiently hopeful to catch the big one, hear: “Fisherman—you—are busy about many things, but only one thing is needed.”

Further around Green Lake I come upon a Great Blue Heron standing in the calm shallow water on the edge of the lake, absolutely still, poised, ready to strike, unable for the early light to see into the water, but, I realize, also fishing, alert to feel the slightest movement of a fish against its toes or against its two thin legs, no gear, just fishing with its feet. On the existential level only one thing is needed, the better part that cannot be taken away, and the Great Blue Heron knows how to fish for the one needed thing.

Somehow each of us knows that to find what we are really looking for, we have to stand utterly still in the pool of Mystery in which we live and fish with our feet for the one, only needed thing. What is it for you: love, service, beauty, truth, life itself, one humanity, family, God, eternity, presence, the unnamable Mystery that brushes against the feet of your soul. Somehow it is about being in one place, not seeing, but knowing. The Welsh poet, R.S. Thomas, alludes to it in a poem called “Still Point”:

In the universe one
world beneath cloud
foliage. In that world
a town. In the town

a house with a child,
who is blind, staring
over the edge of the universe
into the depths of love.

Perhaps this existential interpretation of the gospel calls for a summer day—may you be blessed with more than one—to fish for the meaning of Jesus saying to you: “you are busy about many things, but there is need of only one thing, the better part, which if you choose it will not be taken away from you.”

Finally, the fourth and deepest level of interpretation, only possible with the other three levels actively engaged, is the level of **faith interpretation**. What a mistake to make it the first level, or even the second or the third. Faith is not less than culture, or education, or existential living, but more than each, needing each, building on but going beyond each, not by some greater cleverness of ours but by the grace of God’s revelation in Jesus given to us if we will receive it.

On this level the only one thing needed—while holding important the gift of prayer, the breaking of boundaries of women’s role and discipleship, and fishing blind with the feet of one’s soul in the Mystery within which we stand—is the dawning of a light, a seeing that the only one thing needed is God, not as unattainable, distant Mystery, or as merely brushing the feet of our souls with some elusive experiences, but God as made known, brought near, and given to us, the God revealed in Jesus dying on a cross out of love for all and the God of Jesus raised from the dead at the dawn of a new day to which we belong, a day of our new life because of the active presence in our world of the one thing needed, embracing us with the light of his reign, and assuring us one day of being raised bodily, transformed-into-fullness-of-life in God’s kingdom. God made known and present in Jesus is indeed not only the better part, but the best, and this God shall indeed not be taken away from us, nor we from Him.

That’s the level of faith interpretation, the deepest and fullest and truest and most trustworthy level of meaning from this gospel story or of any other sacred text or experience of our lives. If we accept to live by faith of course we pray, of course we become disciples, of course we feel more sensitively the Mystery of life, because we become part of and live the revelation from God of what life really is, the only thing it is.

It is perhaps best to end this homily in your Baccalaureate Mass, again with R.S. Thomas, the poet. May what he knows by faith be your blessing.

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God. This the deep
calling to deep of the psalm-
writer, the bottomless ocean
we launch the armada of
our thoughts on, never arriving.

It is a presence then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do
but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still?