

“Only One Thing”

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 10: 38-42

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Gather us in this morning, O God, as we listen for your word to us. Open our hearts and our minds; help us to set aside every distraction and to focus, for these moments, on the mystery revealed to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Interruptions are the scourge of modern life. Our days and nights are full of gadgets that ping, buzz and beep their way into our attention, taking us away from whatever we are doing. Distractions hurt productivity. Companies spend lots of money to encourage and teach associates into the “Be Here Now” principle. Be present. Be attentive. Be engaged. Research from the University of California, Irvine, indicates that the typical office worker only get eleven (11) continuous minutes to work on a task before interruption. With smart phones reaching near ubiquity, the problem of tech-driven multitasking — juggling daily tasks with email, text messages, social media etc — is coming to a head.¹

There is a cost for all this multitasking. The cost is that it takes time to re-immense your mind in one topic or another. Interruptions to our work flow or our focus inhibit our ability to “Be Here Now.”

¹ <http://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/students-cant-resist-distraction-two-minutes-neither-can-you-f1C9984270>

Multitasking in our world today is something we say with great pride. I am good at multi-tasking. We ask that in job interviews, “Tell me about your ability to multitask.” Rarely do we say---“Tell me about a time when you were fully present in your work. What was that like?”

We fold laundry and watch TV. We call our mom to check in and cook dinner. We watch the kids/walk the dog and check our e-mail. Play Pokémon Go and walk down a sidewalk unaware of our surroundings. We drive our cars and text, read, put on makeup, eat breakfast. (fill in the blank).

Oh, believe me, I can multitask. So much so that a friend, who serves a large church outside Philadelphia, sent me an advertisement for a T-Shirt she was going to send for Christmas. It reads, “Associate Minister, only because Full Time Multi-Tasking Ninja is not a Job Title.” You have to put it on a T-shirt because, it doesn’t fit well on a business card. But somewhere along the line of “multi-tasking” I can forget to be fully present and focus. I have to work really hard to be fully present in the midst of what we all might call “busy days,” “busy lives.”

Jesus’ visit in today’s gospel text with Martha and Mary follows right on the heels of his encounter with the lawyer and his

parable of the Good Samaritan that was our text for last Sunday. **It's the story of loving neighbor.** And here, in this passage, Jesus shares something of what it means to love God. Maybe read together, the story of the Good Samaritan and the encounter with Mary and Martha, we catch a glimpse of the balance between loving neighbor and loving God.

Jesus and his disciples are slowly making their way to Jerusalem, and **when they get to Martha's house, she** offers Jesus hospitality. She does what is expected of a host, and particularly of a woman in that culture. Martha prepares the house, shows Jesus the guest bedroom, puts cut flowers on the table by his bed, whisks through the living room rearranging furniture as she goes, dusting, fussing, and then disappears into the kitchen, chops onions and carrots, peels potatoes, puts a roast in the oven, scours the cabinets for a suitable dessert.

Meanwhile Mary, her younger sister, is sitting at Jesus' feet, hanging on every word, enthralled. This description identifies **Mary as a disciple. She is in the disciple's position. Luke is up** to something in this text. Boundaries are being crossed. Sitting at the feet of a rabbi as a disciple was not an expected or accepted place for a woman to be. Mary should be helping Martha prepare the meal and serve the guests. But instead, she is present.

On the other hand, Martha's worry and distraction prevent her from being truly present with Jesus. Her irritation is with Jesus who doesn't affirm her multitasking, busyness. She has missed out on the "one thing needed" for true hospitality. There is no greater hospitality than listening to your guest. How much more so when the guest is Jesus!

Jesus' words to Martha may be seen as an invitation rather than a rebuke. *Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.* He does not criticize her for her hospitality, which, after all, was a precious and core value of their people all the way back to Abraham. Jesus does not criticize her for working hard. She's distracted. That's the issue: not that her work is inferior, but at that moment, at least, her work, her obsessive busyness, has interfered with something uniquely important.

The one thing needed is for Martha to receive the gracious presence of Jesus, to listen to his words, to know that she is valued not for what she does or how well she does it, but for who she is as a child of God.²

² Elizabeth Johnson, Columbia Seminary, www.workingpreacher.org. July 21, 2013.

You can find God wherever you are and whatever you are doing. And sometimes your commitment to what you are doing can distract you from something important, maybe even God.

If I were to ask you to tell me today what you are worried about, what would you tell me? Every week people talk to me about the things in their lives that cause worry—about getting that sudden phone call, a frightening medical diagnosis, family dysfunction, a marriage on the rocks, a child in trouble, doubts about their faith, a secret addiction, self-hatred, a major financial setback, seeing my children grow up. Like Martha, we are worried about many things. And also like Martha, we are distracted by many things.

We have umpteen different things to help us live supposedly more productive lives but often they simply create more distractions. We are distracted by the latest app or gadget. The 24/7 news cycle heightens the state of our world. And the emergency alerts on our phones for every major or minor event in our community or world can distract us.

With the recent events in this past week, we worry about our safety. With the terror attack in Nice, France to the political turmoil in Turkey, the tensions in this country around race and class divides, I wonder about what it might look like to live

in a peaceable kingdom in our lifetime. What if we stopped doing so much and sat with Jesus. Would it be worry free? Distraction free?

Jesus is getting us to think about the Kingdom here and all through the Gospel of Luke. What does it look like to find a way to be attentive to the One who brings about peace for our souls and for the world? Attentive to the One who brings hope to those without hope. The One who brings reconciliation to tired and embattled citizens striving for justice and finding it harder and harder to bridge any divide.

Perhaps in the midst of our routine and the busyness of life, the Kingdom of God draws near, but we miss it.

Listening and doing, receiving God's Word and serving others, are vital to the Christian life, just as inhaling and exhaling are to breathing.

What about this week? What if we watch for the ways that God is breaking into your life? Perhaps in a conversation with someone you may meet on a chance encounter. In the gentle breeze that rushes through the trees. In the laughter of family or friends reunited.

You can find God wherever you are and whatever you are doing. But sometimes your commitment to what you are doing can distract you from something more important.

As Christians, we will always wrestle with the tension between action and reflection, doing and being, working and listening. When one begins to outweigh the other, though, we become worried and distracted, and our work becomes more about "us," as Martha's work became more about her, than it is about Jesus.

When we stop to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to what Jesus has to say to us, we are strengthened for the work of the Kingdom, the work God calls us to do.

I read an excerpt this week from a colleague Reverend Cynthia Jarvis about the ways Christian communities are worried and distracted. Because too often we get caught up in the doing and don't pause to study, to pray, to listen, to focus all our attention on Jesus as individuals and as a community of faith and to open ourselves up to what God might be saying to us, she writes,

“A community that is hospitable to Christ is a community marked by the attention the community gives to God's word. A church that has been led to be ‘worried and distracted by many things’ (v.41) inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shallows of frantic potlucks, anxious stewardship campaigns, and events designed simply to perpetuate the institution. Decisions will be made in meetings without a hint of God's reign. Food and drink will appear at table without Christ being recognized in the breaking of bread. Social issues may be addressed, but the gospel is missed in acts that partake of politics as usual. . . . Endless meetings breed resentment in otherwise pleasant Christians because the church's business is being done without any word of the God whom they thought they had agreed to serve.³”

What's that One Thing? It's God at work in our lives, at work in our church, at work in our world. Inviting us. Calling for us to watch. To sit and listen. That one thing---It's Jesus. He greets us at the table when we celebrate communion. He walks with us in our darkest moments. He heals us and comforts us. He makes all things new.

³ Cynthia Jarvis, Luke 10:38-42 Pastoral Perspective, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol 3, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p 264.

So wake up to God. Be present. Be attentive. Be engaged. Pay attention to what is priceless and precious and often right in front of you. **And don't allow your work to distract you from love**—from the people you love and who love and need you—because their love is one of the ways God comes near and touches you and opens your heart and saves your soul.⁴
Amen.

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⁴ Rev. John Buchanan, "Distracted." A sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago in 2010 helped give shape to this sermon.