

Worried and Distracted

Luke 10:38-42
July 17, 2022

First Presbyterian Church
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Barbara Bush, in addressing the Class of 1994 at Wellesley College, said this about striking the right balance when it comes to priorities in life:

“As important as your obligation as a doctor, a lawyer or a business leader may be, your human connections with your spouse, your children and your friends are the most important investment you will ever make. At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, not winning one more verdict or not closing one more deal, but you will regret time not spent with your spouse, your children or your friends.”¹

Jesus Christ, in addressing a first-century household in Bethany of Judea, said this about striking the right balance in life: “Mary has chosen the better part (the better thing), which will not be taken away from her.”

In other words, both Jesus and Barbara Bush encourage us to discern what’s most important in life, and then put our time and energy and resources into that, that which cannot be taken away from us. But just how do we do that? It’s not easy to strike the right balance when it comes to all the demands we face day in and day out, things that demand our time, energy and resources.

Take Martha, for instance. Luke tells us that she and her sister, Mary, saw a special visitor arrive in town and they welcomed him into their home. Of course, that visitor was Jesus.

As Jesus settled in for the visit, Mary sat at his 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 then to help me.”

Boy, can we relate to that. How many of you here can relate to being the one to do all the work around the house; raise your hand and keep it raised right alongside one another. Oh, look at the couples and families who have their hands raised. Interesting, eh? It can’t be that both spouses and all family members do all the work around the house, but it sure can feel like you do, right? And when you feel like you’re the one doing all the work – around the house or at your workplace or church or in making plans with friends – it can be infuriating, can’t it? Frustrating, tiring, not fair, and just plain disheartening. You kind of just want to give up, right?

¹ Barbara Bush, 1994 Commencement Address, Wellesley College, quoted in Current Thoughts and Trends, January 1995, 12.

But we don't. Most everyone feels to some extent that they're carrying the heavier burden at one time or another and there's no real solution to be had.

And yet, Jesus offers us a solution. In his encounter with Martha and Mary, Jesus shows us how to prioritize our lives so that everything and everyone gets the attention that's needed.

Not the attention that we think is needed. Our priorities will always be out of whack in this fallen world of ours. But we can learn to put our time and energy where it's truly needed, and then let the rest unfold as it will.

The clue for how to identify what's most important in life comes when Jesus says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." Martha was worried and distracted by many things, all the cleaning and cooking that needs done whenever a guest arrives. That's why she said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?"

And yet, notice that in saying that, Martha is attacking the Lord, saying he doesn't care, saying he should be telling Mary to help. And he's not! And that makes Martha mad. First she's mad at Mary for just sitting there and then she's mad at Jesus for letting Mary just sit there, for just sitting there himself letting Martha do all the work. And truth be told, Jesus doesn't seem to care; does he? We even feel that way sometimes.

But Jesus does care; of course he cares. He cares as much about Martha as he does about Mary as he does about you, and me. Jesus cares that Martha has allowed herself to become consumed by worry and distractions. It's a good thing we never worry or allow ourselves to get overwhelmed by distractions, right? Not! Of course, we do.

Here's a list of the top 20 things people worry about based on a survey of 2,000 people, listed in descending order: neighborhood crime, their pet's health, how well they're dressed, meeting goals, whether they are good parents, a fight with a friend or family member, finding or having the right partner, does their partner still love them, are they physically attractive, finding a new job, general unhappiness, paying the rent or mortgage, their physique, wrinkles and aging, job security, credit card debt, diet issues, low energy levels, financial savings, and – the No. 1 concern – getting old in general.

Interesting that on this list, there is no mention of spiritual health or one's relationship with God. No concerns about spiritual growth or character development – becoming a better you. Doesn't that have you convinced that our priorities in general are really out of whack, that we're not worried about the right thing, the thing that really matters in life, the thing that cannot be taken away from us?

Jesus isn't saying to Martha or to you that we shouldn't spend time on our daily obligations. But he is saying that if there is a choice, then devotion must win out over dusting; (Yuri, you didn't hear that). No, but really. We each have to discover the love language of the loved ones we have. By love language, I mean those words or actions that show someone that you love him or her. And that's different for everyone.

Perhaps Martha thought Jesus' love language was a clean house and a good meal, and so she was doing all that work to show how devoted she was to the Lord. Or perhaps that's her love language, or the love language she was taught growing up. Either way, clearly it is not Jesus' love language. It was Mary who discovered and expressed Jesus' love language, by sitting nearby and listening to him. That's how she was a blessing to Jesus that day.

By sitting with Jesus and talking with him, Mary gives Jesus love and attention, togetherness and admiration. Mary took time to figure out what would make Jesus feel most blessed. Mary prioritized the person above all else.

"There is need of only one thing," says Jesus, one thing that "will not be taken away," and that one thing is love and devotion – love and devotion for Jesus and love and devotion for one another. If you put that at the top of your list each day, than you and everyone you meet will truly feel blessed.

And that is something that can never be taken from you. Oh, you can lose it, that's for sure – that sense of being blessed and of being a blessing – and you can give it away, let it go, or give up on ever getting it. But that's not what the Lord wants for you, for me.

The Lord wants us to share in and live in the blessing of being a child of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. And God has ways of letting us know when we're not doing such a good job of it, when your priorities are out of whack and it's time to seek the better way, the better part, as Jesus says.

Whenever you feel worried, angry, jealous, sad, in denial, or anything but at peace, that's a good sign there is a better choice in front of you, and you just have to discern what it is. Whatever it is, it's not what you're doing at that moment.

So that's the time to stop and draw near to Jesus and listen, like Mary did. Jesus is always there for you – in scripture, in prayer, through those faithful souls in your life – and Jesus will always point us to the better choice, if we take time to listen, take time to set aside all else and be with Jesus. I'll leave you with these words from theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written in a letter to his wife, Maria:

“A blessing is the visible, perceptible, effective proximity (or closeness) of God. ... That someone should be a blessing is the greatest thing of all, isn't it? Not just a helpmate, or a companion or a friend, but a blessing. May that be how it is in our marriage.” Yes, the greatest thing of all is to be a blessing. May that be who you are in this life. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of all love and peace, we come to you in faith, offering you access into every area of our lives. We pray for this congregation. May we not grow weary in doing good.

We pray for ourselves. Keep us from idleness, that we may not be led astray or left on the sidelines. Enable us to do our work – that which you call us to – quietly and in a manner that pleases you.

Grant us discernment to fill our days with fruitful activity that blesses the lives of others, and in so doing, blessing us, as well. We look to you, Lord of all, mindful of our neediness. Glorify your name through our reliance upon you.

We pray for those who grieve, for those suffering from illness and disease and for those loved ones journeying alongside them in such sacred times of togetherness, compassion and faith.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**