

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 17, 2022

GENESIS 18:1-10A | PSALM 15 | COLOSSIANS 1:15-28 | LUKE 10:38-42

There's a funny little ritual that happens at the stoplight in front of our church. After someone stops at the red light, they'll realize they have a few moments to spare. So they pull out their phone and start texting or making a call. Since they're not paying attention, they don't notice when the light turns green, so the people behind them—people who have Places To Be—start honking. Their precious moments are being wasted. And sure enough, someone who would have gotten through on the green had the person in front been paying attention has to stop at the red. But then they realize they have a few moments to spare, so they take out their phone...

You could blame that aversion to idleness on the technology, but today's gospel reading suggests it might be a more human problem. In today's gospel reading, Martha hosts Jesus and Mary in her home. Jesus and Mary sit around and chat, while Martha moves around the house. Luke tells us that there were "many tasks" she had to get done and after a while, she started getting annoyed that Mary wasn't helping out. So Martha comes back to Jesus and asks him to tell Mary to start pitching in.

This is, to put it mildly, an extreme faux pas. Asking a guest in your house to help litigate a family dispute is uncouth in the extreme. But notice how Jesus responds. He doesn't say, "Martha, that's really impolite." He says, "You are worried and distracted by many things." In the original Greek, *merimnaō*, the focus is on anxiety. The problem is that her busyness, her hurriedness, her fussiness, is distracting her from what's actually important. She is working to make the house suitable for a hypothetical guest while ignoring the real guest in her midst.

Compare that to Mary, who simply sits with Jesus. What makes Mary wise is that she recognizes the difference between what's urgent and what's important. She has—to use Luke's phrase—chosen the better part.

Maybe you know a couple of Marys, but we know way more Marthas. In fact, many of us, including me, probably identify with her in this story. After all, when I ask our congregants how they're doing, the first word that comes back is almost always "busy." High schoolers are busy. Twenty-somethings are busy. Middle-aged folks are busy. The folks in their 90s are busy.

There's nothing wrong with being busy, but sometimes being busy can turn into Busyness. And there's a difference between the two. Being busy is about completing the necessary tasks of the day. Busyness is using those tasks to try to meet an emotional need. And what are those needs?

Busyness can be a way of getting a feeling of control. There is so much in our lives that we can't control, that we'll latch on to anything that gives us a sense of normalcy and competence. There's a character in Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* who makes a to-do list every day, and if there's an item that's intimidating, she just divides it into its parts. So there's nothing that happens in the day that she isn't one hundred percent sure she can do. Maybe you're one of those people that puts simple things on your to-do list just so you can feel like you're making getting somewhere.

Or busyness can be a way to show how needed we are. Busyness isn't fun, but telling other people that you're busy? It's the best. Because it's basically just saying that other people need your attention all the time. It's a less tacky version of bragging about your new sports car. When Martha complains that Mary won't help her, the subtext is that the world would fall apart if she weren't here. Busyness tells us that we can find wholeness and peace through being needed.

And busyness can be a way to distract ourselves. There's an old David Foster Wallace essay called "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never do Again" where he spends a week on a cruise ship. It's sort of an Emersonian "giant eyeball" thing that describes the ship's relentless stream of activities.

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Ping-pong tournament. All-you can eat buffet. Stand-up comedy. Shore excursion. Parasailing. Snorkeling. It never ends. But “at night,” he writes, “when all the ship’s structured fun and reassurances and gaiety-noise ceased—I felt despair.” The appeal of all the busyness isn’t just how fun it all is. It’s how it distracts us from the angst we feel about life. It keeps us out of our heads.

What’s remarkable about Mary’s listening is how it resists all of those. It is a way of giving up control. After all, it’s difficult to follow Jesus if you want to control the agenda. It is a way of not being needed. What she’s doing listening to Jesus doesn’t seem immediately useful to anyone. And it is a way of being fully present. Not pouring in distractions to numb ourselves through the day but creating space for Jesus to work on us. And that begins by listening.

We don’t often think of listening as a kind of spiritual practice, but it is. Listening means creating space to enter into a relationship with someone. Giving someone space to express their identity, experience, or hopes, and offering recognition or reciprocity. Listening means not loading up your own counterargument to deploy when they’re finished. And not noting how their point X reminds you of this thing Y that isn’t related at all, but you really want to talk about. Listening means bringing our whole selves into someone else’s presence. And listening isn’t just literal but metaphorical, too. It means setting aside the feeling that our life is actually happening somewhere else and being fully present to the ways that God creates the world around us. Bringing ourselves before the one to whom all reality is present.

That listening may be the better part, but it’s definitely the harder part. It’s probably not something we’re going to do if we’re left to our own devices.¹ And so Jesus gives Martha and us an invitation. You could almost call it an intervention. You don’t need to fuss. You don’t need to get anxious. You don’t need to make your to-do list more efficient. You can sit. You can listen. You can just be. And that’s enough.

To be present to Jesus, to grow in Christ, doesn’t mean that we need to all shack up in a monastery somewhere and spend our days meditating. Growing in Christ means living and acting, too. But even in our living and acting, we can still create space to enter into that holy conversation with God. Even when we act, we can still listen.

There’s a phrase that’s common in the Jesuit community: *Age quod agis*. “Do what you’re doing.” If you’re eating, eat. If you’re working, work. If you’re praying, pray. If you’re waiting at a stoplight, wait at a stoplight. To grow in Christ is not to find God after we get all of our tasks done, but to find how God is present to us throughout our days. We can bring ourselves fully into each moment because we trust that God is always present to us.

If you’re someone who seeks security in control, there may be grace in learning to live open-handed. If you’re someone who needs to be needed, there may be grace in learning to be loved. And if you’re someone who needs to cover up the angst of life with activity, it may be enough simply to sit in that with God.

After all, Jesus tells us, this gift, this presence, will not be taken away from us.

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¹ Pun sort of intended.