

Your Full Attention, Please
Douglas Forrester
Crozet United Methodist Church
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost - July 18, 2010
Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's 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." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

It was in February, two years ago, when I was leaving a meeting 120 miles away in Blackstone, Virginia to come home to Crozet. It was Ash Wednesday, and I had to get home in time for evening worship as we joined with Christians around the world in marking the beginning of the season of Lent. I had already arranged for Jackie Sandridge to preach for me, but I still needed to get to church by the start of the service. No one could leave this particular meeting in Blackstone until it was over, and when I finally got on the road, I knew I would be cutting it close.

I just so happened that I had received that day a new CD to which I could not wait to listen. In fact, I became so enthralled in what I was listening to, when I realized where I was, I had driven all the way to Appomattox.

Have you ever walked into a room, and then cannot remember why?

Have you ever been taking a shower and cannot remember if you have shampooed your hair?

Have you ever stood in front of the medicine cabinet and asked yourself, "I came in here to take my medicine. Have I done it yet?"

Have you been driving in town and suddenly realized that you cannot remember the last three intersections?

Has someone ever looked at you and asked, "What was I just talking about?"

What I am talking about is more than simple daydreaming. I am talking about what the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman calls "continuous partial attention." In a November, 2006 column called "The Taxi Driver," he told of an experience he had while being driven in a taxi in France from the airport to Paris. The drive was an hour, and he notes that during that time, the cab driver had not only driven the cab, but had talked on his cell phone and watched a video (while driving the cab!). Likewise, Friedman had been riding, writing a column on his laptop, and listening to his iPod. What they never did in this one-hour conversation was talk to each other.

In this article, Friedman quotes a technologist named Linda Stone who describes that in this Internet age we are suffering from what she calls "continuous partial attention," although perhaps, among others things, this morning's text teaches us that continuous partial attention has been alive and

well for much, much, longer.¹

In this morning's text, Jesus has made a stop on his way to Jerusalem, to his death. As he stops by the house of a woman named Martha, he is dealing with a matter of priorities as manifest in the personalities of Martha and her sister Mary. Jesus has entered their town and been welcomed into Martha's home. Upon his arrival, Martha's sister Mary begins to sit at the feet of Jesus. In Rabbinic lore, there is a saying that is "Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst . . . [but] talk not much with womankind." By sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary is acting like a male. She neglects her duty to assist her sister in the preparation of the meal, and by violating a clear social boundary she is bringing shame upon her house. (NIB).

Martha complains that she has been left to do all of the work necessary to entertain a guest. The text makes it feel like perhaps this is not the first time Martha has made this complaint about her sister. She sees Jesus as the one to finally set her sister straight so she makes this observation to Christ: *Lord, tell Mary to get in here and help me. This is not fair!*

What is strange about this text is that, at first blush, it isn't fair. Mary ought to help out a bit. Hospitality was very important in Jesus' culture and there would have been several responsibilities Martha would have to meet. Her frustration seems, at first blush, completely justifiable. However, Jesus reminds her that Mary's interest in him is different from normal, everyday pursuits. Luke says that Martha is "distracted by her many tasks." The literal word for what is distracting Martha is her service, the Greek word being her *diakoni*, the word from which we get the English word *deacon*, a church word for those who have an official ministry of servant leadership in the church (NIB). Yet, Jesus is able to use this conflict as a teachable moment, as he teaches Martha and teaches us what it means for his people to place him at the center of our lives.

The theologian John Shea writes that this text may be an example of a time when the English translation of the text may have led us astray. In English, we hear Jesus tell Martha that Mary has chosen "the better part," while in Greek, the word is translated not as "better" but as "good." In other words, Jesus is affirming Mary's choice of the "good part," saying that she has chosen "the connection to God who is good," that the Christian faith and life is manifest and present in both our time of action and service, as God delegates to us that holy work of bringing about a world of mercy, peace, and justice, yet God also *sustains* us, nurtures and nourishes us through those times of devotion and piety, those times when we avail ourselves of God's means of grace: study of Scripture, worship, the sacraments, prayer, fasting, and time spent in quiet reflection with God.² The Christian life, then, is not an either/or dichotomy, where Mary is correct and Martha is wrong. Faithful, obedient, life-giving discipleship requires both.

Still, do we not see this dichotomy play out in congregations like ours? There are those who feel that too much work is done by too few people, who hustle about, working, giving, serving, and just plain *doing*, all the time wondering from whom their help will come, distressed that so many seem

¹ Thomas Friedman, "The Taxi Driver," *New York Times*, November 1, 2006.

² John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: The Relentless Widow, Year C*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 203.

satisfied to come on Sunday, to sit and hear God's word, without fully comprehending just how much needs doing within the community of faith.

Yet here is the thing: without the devotion and piety of Mary, without filling ourselves with the blessings and grace of God's worship and word, the work of the church becomes, well, just *work*. Conversely, if our lives within Christian community are only about our *own* spiritual nourishment and our *own* spiritual well-being, we deny the fact that our Lord is one fond of the words, "Go and do likewise," which he said in our gospel reading for last Sunday, which was the parable of the good Samaritan.

In this morning's text, what Jesus does not say is no less important as what he does say. Do you notice that Jesus does not criticize Martha's work, nor does he deny that it is necessary to do. Jesus does not tell Martha to stop working. What Jesus does challenge Martha on, however, is that she is "worried and distracted by many things." His concern does not seem to be with busy Martha, hardworking Martha, or hospitable Martha. His concern is with "worried and distracted" Martha, and I believe that he has the same concern for us.

How many times has worry or distraction affected the quality of your life? How often is it that the things you worry about never happen to you? A quote incorrectly attributed to Kurt Vonnegut says that "worrying is as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum." We know this, but it does not stop us? Worry leads to distraction and distraction disconnects us from one another, and before we know it, we are not only forgetting how we got through the last three intersections, but we are forgetting what it means to be truly present and truly connected with God and with one another, and friends, we live in an age where continuous partial attention is not only real, it is considered normative, if not virtuous.

And we can continue to live this way, but we do so at our peril, for time passes unconcerned with whether or not you and I are aware of it. It reminds me of the quote by the devil Screwtape in C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* who writes,

"As the uneasiness and reluctance to face it cut him off more and more from all real happiness, and as habit renders the pleasures the vanity and excitement and flippancy at once less pleasant and harder to forgo...you will find that anything or nothing is sufficient to attract his wandering attention. You no longer need a good book, which he really likes, to keep him from his prayers or his work or his sleep; a column of advertisements in yesterday's paper will do. You can make him waste his time not only in conversation he enjoys with people whom he likes, but also in conversations with those he cares nothing about, on subjects that bore him. You can make him do nothing at all for long periods. You can keep him up late at night, not roistering, but staring at a dead fire in a cold room. All the healthy and outgoing activities which we want him to avoid can be inhibited and nothing given in return, so that at last he may say...**I now see that I spent most my life doing in doing neither what I ought nor what I liked.**"³

3 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*.

I now see that I spent most my life doing in doing neither what I ought nor what I liked. I once, in a previous pastoral appointment, thought I was too important to the prosperity and survival of the Christian faith to leave my post that I worked 100 consecutive Sundays without taking a vacation. Two years. The result of this was disastrous. Not only was I an absentee husband and father, I wasn't really present with my wife and daughter when we were in the same room, as my worried and distracted mind blew like a feather in the wind, yet never really landed anywhere. I remember the day before we finally left to take a family vacation being on the phone for five or ten minutes with someone who was considering joining the church for five or ten minutes, only to hang up at the end of the call, unable to recall anything we had discussed.

How many of us, if we could spend five or ten more minutes with someone we have lost, in any of the different ways we can lose someone, would spend those five or ten minutes allowing ourselves to be worried and distracted by many things? How many of us would not hang on each word in the pauses in between them? How many of us would be anything but truly present with that person?

The fact of the matter is that we are always losing people we love, one minute at a time, and the time to learn and practice that holy art of true presence with others is now, because, as this morning's text teaches us, when we are fully present, body, mind, and soul with others, we are practicing a holy and sacred art, as we demonstrate how the holy and living God is, by the power of the Holy Spirit, present with us through the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

And to be the busy coworkers with Christ in making real God's kingdom on earth, being truly present with the God of life, the God whose heart *yearns* for us, and whose will it is for us to be whole, is the source of the grace that we need to give our full attention in service to those who need us the most.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.