

Continuous Partial Attention

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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.

39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

40 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."

41 But the Lord answered her,

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;

42 there is need of only one thing.

Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

THE TAXI DRIVER

Ten years ago in the New York Times Thomas Friedman wrote about an hour long taxi ride from the Paris airport.

In that hour the cab driver talked on his cell phone and watched a video as he drove. Tom worked on a speech using his laptop and listened to his iPod.

He wrote, "There was one thing that we never did: talk to each other."

Tom concluded that they had contracted the disease of the Internet age, “continuous partial attention.”

That was ten years ago, and things have gotten worse instead of better.

This past week I read about the latest craze, Pokemon Go.

It’s a video game where people travel around town glued to their smart phones.

Their goal is to collect cartoon characters that are displayed in the places that they visit.

There’s something to be said for this game.

It does get people up and moving.

But, there are some problems.

At least one person has already been hit by a car while playing the game.

Some have been lured by thieves into places where they could be mugged.

I overheard some young men talking about their experience with the game.

It seems that their search for virtual monsters took them to a gym where young girls were training to be gymnasts.

The moms were not so sure about these young men with their cell phones on pointing them in all directions!

Many gamers have been told that playing the game was not appropriate in places like the Holocaust museum or the Arlington National Cemetery.

What’s the world coming to?

Right?

But, on the other hand, I wonder if the problem of “continuous partial attention” has always been with us.

Today’s Scripture lesson might be an example.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOSPITALITY

When Jesus decided to drop in on Martha and her sister Mary, Martha's first impulse was to get something going in the kitchen.

Hospitality was important in the ancient world.

In the book of Hebrews we read that we should not neglect to show hospitality to strangers because in so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

Some of us have been brought up in a culture where hospitality is extremely important.

We understand Martha's concerns.

But, Mary, her sister, did not worry about hospitality.

Instead, she sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to what he had to say.

Mary was focused on the words of Jesus.

That was good.

And Martha was focused on the demands of being a good host.

That was good too.

DISTRACTED

But, the Bible tells us that Martha was "distracted" by her many tasks.

She had too many things on her mind at once.

And that was not so good

This is where the ancient story and the modern story come together. If we are distracted by many things we cannot focus on the main thing.

I must confess.

I'm a lot like Martha.

I am often distracted by many things.

I am afflicted with the Internet disease of "continuous partial attention."

And I suspect that many of you suffer from the same illness.

But, what are we to do about it?

Speaking about the distractions of the modern world Linda Stone wrote,

“We’re so accessible, we’re inaccessible. We can’t find the off switch on our devices or on ourselves ...

We are everywhere—except where we actually are physically.”

Martha was so distracted by the demands of hospitality that she said to Jesus,

“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself. Tell her to help me.”

I recognize that frustration.

When we try to juggle too many things at once, it all gets to be too much.

We become frustrated and even angry.

It’s just not fair.

And we often suggest others are to blame for our harried existence.

THE REAL PROBLEM

But, maybe, like Martha, we have misdiagnosed the problem.

The problem is not what others have said on Facebook or in the latest text or tweet.

The problem is our inability to turn off the distractions in order to focus on what is really important.

I like modern technology.

We have some terrific tools that let us do more in less time. Sometimes social media can bring us closer together.

But, sometimes technology becomes a distraction instead of a help. Our compassion becomes virtual instead of real.

If we are distracted by many things, our spiritual life can be impoverished. We don't have time to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to his words.

And that separates us not only from our Lord but also from the people around us.

A GENTLE REMINDER

How did Jesus deal with the problem of being distracted by many things?

He gently brought this problem to Martha's attention. Biblical scholar Ray Summers in his commentary on this passage notes that the repetition of Martha's name indicates a sense of compassion and familiarity.

There was a softness in his voice as Jesus said, "Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things ..."

Martha is critical of Jesus and her sister, but Jesus is not so quick to judge.

Instead, Jesus analyzes what is going on and gently explains to Martha why she feels so torn and tormented by her situation.

Jesus truly appreciates Martha's desire to be a good hostess. But, it was causing her to miss something of greater importance.

Her problem is worry and distraction.

Her mind is so full that she has no room for anything else.

SELF EVALUATION

When I feel estranged from the Lord and from the people that I love,
(and those two usually go together),
I try to take a step back and refocus.

Why am I feeling this way?

How have I been spending my time?
 Have I been distracted by many things while I neglect the main thing?

Quite often after honest reflection, I find this to be the case.

I have to find a way to turn off those devices that dominate my life.
 But, more importantly I have to learn how to turn off those fearful and accusatory inner voices that also demand my attention.

I have to ask with an open mind,
 “What is really important?
 And what is just a distraction?”

To be honest, much of what occupies our life is not all that important.

And sometimes it takes a traumatic event to help us understand that.

ON THE WAY TO JERUSALEM

Why do you think this story is included in Luke’s gospel?

And how does it fit into the larger story?

In the ninth chapter of Luke, verse 51 we read that Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem. This is an important turning point in Luke’s gospel.

In Luke’s narrative from this point on all the action takes place under the shadow of the cross.
 Jesus refused to be distracted from that all-important journey to Jerusalem.

And you’ll recall that he warned his disciples that this would not be an easy journey.
 They needed to listen carefully to his words.

They had to give up the old way of life in order to follow.

They had to put their hand to the plow and not look back.

Even important family obligations took a back seat when it came to this journey to Jerusalem.

And so this visit to the home of Martha and Mary was more than just a normal house call.

This was a stop on the way to Jerusalem.

The meal that Martha would serve that day was not be the most important thing.

The most important thing would be the presence of Jesus, the Son of God who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

This was no time to be distracted, even with duties that were important and necessary.

Now don't misunderstand.

Martha was right to serve and provide hospitality to her guests. It was indeed a sacred duty.

Jesus said that even the simplest act of service was important in the Kingdom of God. Even a cup of cool water given in Jesus' name could change things for the better.

The passage that precedes this one, the parable of the Good Samaritan, teaches us the importance of service.

It's not enough just to know what God requires.
You have to do what faith requires.

But, sometimes even good things can become a distraction from the main thing.

Jesus didn't tell Martha that her serving was wrong.
He just said that in this particular situation it wasn't the best thing.

When disciples are on the road to the cross,
taking some time to listen to the words of Jesus is the best thing that they can do.

In our world, a world that is also filled with destruction and violence,

taking some time to listen to the words of Jesus is also the best thing that we can do.

DON'T YOU CARE?

When we are worried about many things, it distracts us. Our behavior becomes erratic.

We may even blame others in a way that is unfair.

We may even come to Jesus and say,

“Don't you care?

Don't you care that there is no justice in the world.
Don't you care that these crazy terrorists are wreaking havoc?”

But, when we do that, we forget that Jesus is on the way to the cross. Jesus is on the way to face the darkness that envelops us.

Jesus is on the way to bring salvation and forgiveness to a world that is broken and afraid.

You see, the cross is not just about what happened long ago.

The cross is about what is happening here and now.

The words of Jesus challenge us to love, forgive and have hope in the face of evil today.

WORRY

Do you feel like Martha?
Are you worried and distracted, pulled in many directions by a world that seems out of control?

It's time to simplify your life.
Sit at the feet of Jesus.
Listen to his words.

Do you remember the words Jesus had for a worried and anxious generation?

Jesus said, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (Luke 12:25)

The answer of course is "no".

Worry cannot add a single hour to our life.

(In fact, worry very well may take time away from our life.)

We know that.

We know that worry does no good.

We know that many of the things we worry about are not important.

And many of the things that we worry about are things that are beyond our control.

CREATION AND PROVIDENCE

In this passage on worry, Jesus went on to point out the glory of nature. The beauty of the lilies of the field and the green meadows are a testament to the providence of God.

And Jesus said,

"If God clothes the grass of the field in such glory, don't you think that God will take care of us as well?"

I saw a breathtaking example of this on my recent vacation. I cruised the southern coast of Alaska and it was for me a spiritual experience.

The ship passed by mountains carved by great glaciers. We saw green meadows that were untouched by human hands.

On one occasion we even saw a bear grazing in the meadow like some kind of furry cow!

Mile after mile after mile of breathtaking beauty.

Snow capped mountains stretched as far as the eye could see.

I was transfixed as I stood shivering in the wind and cold of the Alaska "summer".

And I had a personal epiphany. I said to myself,

“God created this.

If God can do this, shouldn't I trust God to care for his creation?

Do I really have to fill my life with anxiety and fear?

Do I really have to be worried about many things as if it's all up to me?”

Jesus tells me that the answer is no.

Worry is unnecessary.

The God who created the beauty of nature can be trusted to care for us.

God will give us what we need.

This perspective enables us to respond to the challenges of this world with faith instead of fear.

Instead of becoming distracted and anxious, we can focus in on the most important thing.

This is our Father's world.

And in the words of Jesus we learn that the final chapter of that world will not be a word of hate.

The final chapter of that world will be a word of grace.

SAYING GRACE

Martha wanted to serve the Lord as fine a meal as she could muster.

But, Martha was so busy dishing up a meal,
that she inadvertently served a side dish ... the bread of anxiety.

But, Mary seemed to sense that Jesus came to calm the fears that plague us.

The first course of the meal that he served was the bread of heaven.

It was a word of grace.

And it was the better part of the meal.

When I was growing up, we referred to the prayer before our meal as “saying grace.”

My parents taught me to say,

“God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food.”

We still say grace at our table.

The words are still simple and short.

But, sometimes when we’re saying those simple words, time seems to slow down ... just a bit.

I recognize that something eternal is at play.

The common meal becomes something sacred.

All of us need that sense of the sacred.

We need to sense that there is more to life than just bread.

We need the bread of heaven.

So let us turn off those distractions, if just for a moment and tune in to Jesus

Jesus wants us to hear a Word of grace so joyous and amazing that our whole perspective on the world changes.

Jesus wants us to choose the better way.

Let us give Jesus our full attention.

Before the meal begins, let us once again sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his gracious words.

Amen.