

# ***Giving It Our Full Attention***

Luke 10:38-42

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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*<sup>38</sup>Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup>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." <sup>41</sup>But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (NRSV)*

## I

Several years ago an American newspaper reporter flew to Paris. After arriving at the airport and collecting his luggage, he found a cab to take him to his hotel. During the ride in the cab, he and the cabbie collectively did six things.

The cabbie was driving the cab, of course. But he also had a Bluetooth wireless phone clipped to his ear and was talking animatedly to someone on the other end. Furthermore, he was watching a movie on the car's dashboard's screen—on the flat panel that usually displays the GPS road map. Driving, phoning, and watching a movie.

Meanwhile in the back seat, the newspaper reporter was also doing three things. Riding, of course; but writing a newspaper column on his laptop. When that was done, he pulled out his iPod and listened to a Stevie Nicks album.

When the reporter arrived at his hotel, he reflected on his cab ride: he and the driver had been together for an hour, and between the two of us they had done six different things. But there was one thing they never did in that hour: they never talked to each other.<sup>1</sup>

Back in 1998, Linda Stone, a technology consultant and writer who has worked for both Apple and Microsoft, coined the term "continuous partial attention." This, she says, is a common disease of the Internet age.<sup>2</sup> Continuous partial attention is two people riding in a cab, doing six different things, devoting only part of their attention to any of those six things. Continuous partial attention occurs when I'm at one of my computers, listening to music while monitoring my email while writing a sermon. Continuous partial

attention results whenever we try to do two or more things at the same time. Inevitably, our attention is divided.

## II

Jesus spots the problem of continuous partial attention in Luke 10:38-42. Our modern dilemmas are not as unique as we sometimes suppose, because already in the first century Martha was succumbing to the problem of continuous partial attention.

Over the years people have interpreted this little story of Martha, Mary, and Jesus in several ways. One of the most common interpretations is to say that Mary's act of listening at the feet Jesus is more valuable than Martha's act of cooking for Jesus in the kitchen. Using this line of interpretation, people sometimes even argue that it's better to sit still and pray instead of bustling around doing acts of service for other people. We set up a tension between prayer and service, and then proceed to argue that prayer is more holy than service.

Recent scholarship shows that this interpretation is almost certainly wrong.<sup>3</sup> The reason is that in many other passages, Luke consistently upholds the religious and spiritual value of service to others (e.g., Lk 8:2-3; 22:24-27; 23:55-56; 24:22-24; Acts 9:36-39; 16:14-15; 18:2-3, 18). So it makes no sense to say that in chapter 10 Luke is making some sort of exception and showing that service is inferior to listening and prayer. No, both service and prayer are valuable. Martha's service in the kitchen is just as important as Mary's listening in the living room.

Then what's the point of this story? Why does Jesus gently chide Martha? What causes Jesus to suggest a better approach?

The problem is that Martha engages in continuous partial attention. She's trying to do three things at once. She's trying to cook a meal in the kitchen, *and* trying to listen to Jesus over in the living room, *and* trying to construct arguments in her head about why Mary should be helping her in the kitchen. Finally she sticks her head into the living room and erupts: Jesus, don't you care that Mary has left me with all this work? Tell her to get in here and help me!

That's when Jesus gently chides her. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing" (NRSV). Mary has chosen the better way, which is to do one thing at a time. In other words, choose which thing you most need to do right now, or most want to do right now, and then do that one thing. Either finish cooking the meal or come in here with us and listen. You'll be better off spiritually if you focus your full attention on one thing at a time.

### III

In the sixth Beatitude, Matthew 5:8, Jesus calls this purity of heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart," he says, "for they will see God." That phrase "pure in heart" doesn't refer to moral perfection—to some exalted state of sinlessness. Instead it refers to focusing on one thing. It is to want one thing at a time, to focus on one thing at a time, to do one thing at a time.

If we choose to drive a car, then let us do that one thing. I know a man here in Goshen who visited some friends of his in Germany. One afternoon they agreed to drive somewhere in the car. My Goshen friend watched as his German friend methodically put on his leather jacket and a pair of leather driving gloves. The German friend climbed in behind the wheel of his BMW and my Goshen friend sat beside him in the front seat. My friend assumed they would keep talking during the drive. But such was not the case. Once the German friend pulled onto the Autobahn and set the cruise for 80-85 miles an hour, he refused to talk any more. My Goshen friend peppered him with questions and comments, but the driver only grunted. His eyes were focused on the road and both his hands stayed on the wheel. Finally my friend understood what was happening: his German friend wanted to focus on only one thing—and that was the job of driving safely. He wanted no distractions whatsoever, not even conversation. So the rest of the trip passed in amiable quiet.

If we choose to serve others in the name of Christ, then let us do that one thing. Suppose you're an MYFer and you're serving at our church's Valentine's Day dinner for older adults. Suppose also that while you're carrying food from the kitchen to the

fellowship hall, you're wired up to the iPod nestled in your pocket, listening to music. What are you communicating to the people you're trying to serve? When they see those buds in your ears, they'll probably feel like you don't want to interact with them, like the music is more important to you than they are. Jesus suggests the better course of action is to leave the earbuds in your pocket and give your full attention to serving.

If we choose to pray, then let us do that one thing. One day Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic, was reading a poem at a leisurely pace, trying to give the poem her full attention. While reading the poem, she unexpectedly had an experience of being possessed by Christ. After this pivotal experience, she began reciting the Lord's Prayer every day with her complete concentration, which in turn led her to further experiences of connection with Christ.<sup>4</sup>

In my own experiences of prayer, I've noticed that it's harder to maintain my concentration during longer stretches of prayer. If I'm praying for 30-60 minutes, it's almost inevitable that I'll get distracted by something around me in the environment or by something inside of me. But in shorter periods of prayer, complete concentration is more realistic. I'm drawn to Simone Weil's daily practice of taking a short prayer—even at a slow pace, the Lord's Prayer only takes a few minutes—and giving that your total focus. Like anything, it will take practice—but it sounds doable.

#### IV

We're still left with a question. Why focus on one thing at a time? What's the advantage? What's the purpose?

The purpose is to become more deeply aware of God. When we do several things at once, it's notoriously difficult—if not impossible—to become aware of God's presence. One perceptive observer of the Christian life says that "it takes a lifetime [for us] to really understand that God is in what is standing in front of me."<sup>5</sup> Our omnipresent God always stands in front of us, beside us, and behind us. It's a lot easier to become aware of God's presence in everyday life when we're focused on one thing. Focal living slows us down to live more fully in the present moment. The habit of living well in the present moment

eventually reveals to us the shimmering presence of God. We discover that God is at hand, in this place, in this moment.

## V

I began with a story about an American journalist and his cab ride in Paris. On another trip, that same journalist was in Jerusalem, trying to connect with his friend, Yaron Ezrahi. He kept calling his friend's cellphone and getting no answer. Eventually he went over to his friend's house and knock on the door. "Yaron, what's wrong with your cellphone?" the journalist asked. "I called but you didn't answer."

"It was stolen a few months ago," Yaron answered, adding that he decided not to replace it because its ringing was constantly breaking his concentration. "Since then," continued Yaron, "the first thing I do every morning is thank the thief [who stole my cellphone] and wish him a long life."<sup>6</sup>

## VI

What would help you to move you away from continuous partial attention? What would improve your ability to focus on one thing at a time? What would enhance your sensitivity to God, in this moment, in this place, with this person?

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, "The Taxi Driver," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/01/opinion/01friedman.html>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://lindastone.net/qa/continuous-partial-attention/>

<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1: Propers 3-16*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 263-267.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Boers, *Living into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012), 82. Weil writes about this in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Colophon, 1951), 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> Joan Chittister, *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Friedman, op cit.