

## Too Much to Do, or Doing Too Much?

Luke 10:38-42

July 22, 2007

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*

*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*

What will you regret when you die? Take time to think about this. When you die, what will you wish you had either done more or less of as you look back at your life? What will you wish you had spent more time doing, and what will you think caused you to waste part of your life? What will you regret?

You know, one of the privileges you get as a pastor is that you get to hear people talk about their lives, joys, experiences, and regrets. And do you know what I hear the most from people? I hear people saying that they spent too much time trying to get ahead or getting things under control, and not enough time laughing, playing, and doing things with the people they love. I never hear people say that they wished they had spent more time at work, had made more money, or had become more important. Instead, they talk about how they wished they had spent more time with their spouses, children, friends, and others in their families.

I don't just hear this regret among laity. I hear it among pastors. You would think that being a pastor automatically makes a person more balanced and appreciative in her or his life, but that's not the case. I've heard far too many pastors complain, when they retired, that they wished they had spent less time serving God in church, and more time serving God as a husband, wife, father, or mother.

I think the first person I met who really reflected a life of regret was a man who didn't even know he had these regrets. Instead, he was a man living with the consequences of a life spent in a regretful lack of concern for family, friends, and life. I met him in 1987, during the summer that I spent in Washington, D.C. working as a chaplain at a local hospital. All summer long I had heard about a particular patient from the other chaplains, a guy who had moved from floor to floor in the hospital throughout the summer.

He was a man with an interesting history. Until his retirement a few years earlier, he had been a senior vice-president at the World Bank. He was a man of power. Leaders the world over kowtowed to him in their attempts to procure loans for important projects in their countries. When he retired, he retired as one of the most influential and powerful men in the world. By the time he came to the hospital, he was a very different man. He had no more power, and without his position, he was lost.

He was in the hospital for some sort of kidney problem. Each time he would have some sort of medical procedure that required him to leave a particular floor of the hospital, he would be transferred to another floor. Why? Because he had ticked off the nurses and staff of that floor so much that they refused to take him back after he left. Slowly, he was transferred to each floor of the hospital throughout the summer. By the end of the summer, he was transferred to the floor I was responsible for.

What did he do to earn the scorn of the hospital staff? Well, it would start once he woke up in the morning. He would start yelling in a low voice, “Nurse.” Then he would get progressively louder: “Nurse! Nurse!! NURSE! NURSE! **BLANK-BLANK IT** (you can fill in the blank) **GET IN HERE!**” The nurse would come in and ask what was wrong. The man would say something like “I don’t like my pillow.”

A few minutes after the nurse would leave it would start all over again: “Nurse. Nurse! Nurse!! NURSE! NURSE! The nurse would come in and ask what was wrong, and he would say, “I want some water.” Each time he would make it sound as though the world was falling apart, yet he would ask for something minor and silly. If the nurse refused to help him, he would hurl curse at her or him. You would think that the hospital staff might be able to get his family to intervene and get him to behave, but his wife had left him years before and his son wanted to have nothing to do with him.

One morning, he was yelling and screaming up a storm because the nurses were ignoring him, and so I decided to visit him. His arms were strapped down because he would get angry and pull his I.V.s out in his temper tantrums. I walked in and asked him what was wrong. He said, “Who are you?” “I’m a chaplain,” I replied. “Take these things off my arms” he said. “I can’t do that.” “Well, get someone who can.” There isn’t anybody who will take them off.” “Then get me the hospital administrator.” “I can’t do that either.” “Then what (blank) good are you?”

After thinking for a while, I finally responded, “I’m not much good, but I’m the last person in the hospital who’s willing to sit and talk with you. You’ve managed to tick off everyone else in the hospital to the point that they don’t even want to help you. You’ve tried to bully everyone, and it’s left you here alone. I’m the only one left willing to sit and talk with you.” He looked at me for a while, and finally said, “Okay, then why don’t you sit with me.” We actually had a nice conversation as he told me his life story.

I tell you all of this because of how he really reflected the essence of our passage for this morning. He was a guy who had everything our culture tells us is supposed to make us happy. He had wealth, power, prestige, status, yet what good did it do him? He was busy and accomplishing things. Despite all he had achieved, in the end he was left powerless and alone in a hospital bed, desperate for anyone to pay attention to him. What do you think his ultimate legacy was? Do you think the things he thought really mattered ended up really mattering? He was living the consequences of his regrets.

Our passage for this morning is a major lesson in remembering what matters in life. . Jesus is invited by a woman named Martha to share a meal at her house. We don't have much detail about either her or her sister, Mary. Mary might have been Mary Magdalene, but it isn't necessarily clear. What is clear is that Martha was busy in another part of the house, preparing dinner. For her this dinner was a big event. She was hosting a holy man, whom some were calling the Messiah, and she wanted everything to be perfect. I guess in that way she was the ancestor of another Martha, Martha Stewart. Martha feverishly prepared dinner, but her sister, Mary, was content to sit at Jesus' feet and encounter God. The more Martha sweated and Mary listened, the more it irritated Martha. Finally, she went to Jesus and asked him to get Mary to help her.

Martha's plea were not without merit. In the ancient society of the day, women were second-class citizens. They didn't learn, they worked. Men learned. Martha had every right to expect Mary to help her. The culture demanded it. Fortunately, Jesus wasn't all that tied up in the culture. He was much more accepting of women as equals. For instance, Mary Magdalene pretty much served Jesus on equal footing with the disciples. Jesus recognized the importance of Mary's sitting and learning about God. So Jesus replied to Martha to let go of her anxieties and worries about preparing the meal, and to recognize how important it was for Mary to hear about God and the way God is calling us to live. Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen the "better" part. In other words, Mary had chosen to spend time with God. He was not telling Martha that the meal was unimportant, only that there were times in which focusing on God was more important, and this was one of them.

What Jesus teaches us in this passage is that there is a way to center our lives in what matters, to center ourselves in a way that keeps us grounded. The reality is that we struggle with balance. We often feel like we are stretched too thin, following the demands of the clock, moving to the pace of our work, but also stretching to find personal time and/or family time. We can often feel angry, frustrated, dumped on by our kids and our family, isolated, and as though no one listens. It creates a condition in which our insides twist and turn and roil about. And what we seek most is serenity, a place where we can find solace and calmness.

Some of us think that if we could just move to a South Seas island, or somewhere tropical, we would find peace, but the truth is that the same problems we have now would follow us there. We would take paradise and turn into the same roiling mess we have now. Why? Because the problems we have aren't on the outside. They have to do with the decisions we make on the inside. What we want is something that only God can give us. What we want is balance because our lives are out of balance. But to find balance takes a willingness to imitate Christ.

Typically, when we think of Jesus' life, we think of him as being a man on a mission, a man of action—always busy, always doing. But take a look more deeply at his life. You'll find that he was incredibly balanced. As much as he preached, taught, healed, provoked, and did, he also took a tremendous amount of time to pray, center, and be grounded. For instance, when he started his ministry, he didn't just rush out and do things. He went into the desert to become centered. Then he called his disciples, taught, and preached, but afterwards he took his disciples away to a lonely place to center and balance again.

There's a story of Jesus stilling a storm that comes early in his ministry and reflects his balance. Do you know why he was crossing the lake when the storm cropped up? It was because he and the disciples were going off to find a place to get away from the crowds. The passage not only told about what was going on, but it serves as a metaphor. The disciples were struggling, worried, and feeling overwhelmed. Jesus' response was that they needed to calm down, have faith, and trust. They needed to let storms rage around them, yet not let them rage within them.

What Jesus has taught us is that bringing balance back into life has everything to do with our spiritual life. If we live a life grounded in seeking God's way, what Jesus calls the "best part," we end up just knowing what matters. There's a way of discovering balance in your life, and it all begins with finding a way to imitate Jesus and bring prayer into the center of your life. To me, that means doing five things:

First, we need to **make time for prayer every day**. We need to recognize that no one is going to come to us and say, "Go ahead and take this time to pray." Instead, people see prayer as a luxury, as something they do if they have free time. But that's not what Jesus did. He *made* time for prayer. He created a time and a place for prayer. If you want to become more balanced, take ten to twenty minutes a day to talk with God. Do it in the morning before work or before you get busy. Do it at lunch. Do it at night. It doesn't matter *when* you do it. It matters *that* you do it.

Second, **talk with God throughout the day**. I learned this practice early on in my ministry. Just as you might talk with a good friend throughout the day, talk with God all the time. In the midst of meetings, talk with God and ask God for guidance. When you see a beautiful flower, compliment and thank God for it. When you aren't certain what to do with your life, include God among the ones you talk with.

Third, **pray over small and large decisions at home, work, and anywhere else**. Don't just take the big stuff to God. Take everything to God.

Fourth, **listen for God's guidance as much as possible**. Believe it or not, God does speak to us, but most of us are either too busy to hear, or we only hear what we want to hear. Truly listen to God. Take time to pay attention to how God is guiding us. You may get it wrong, but so what? What matters is that you are trying to listen. And over time you'll figure out when God is really speaking, and when it is just your own mind pretending to be God.

Finally, **put God at the center of your life, and you will find balance**.

**Amen.**