

Alternative

Ecclesiastes 1:2-9, 3:14-15; Luke 10:38-42

July 17, 2016

Brian Russo

For the last several weeks, we've been forced to preach on the horrific events in the news. And sadly, it seems that every week we could do that, especially with what just happened in Nice and what's going on now in Turkey. Honestly though, I'm not sure if we should turn this pulpit into a rolling ticker of catastrophe. The news suffocates us with enough death-dealing in this world that I think we might need a reprieve every now and then, especially when in this Sanctuary. Plus, there are a lot of problems on the more immediate home-front, emotional, philosophical, and psychological, that also require our investigation. So, here's an alternative message. And a different kind of message at that...

There was once a boy who had a magical bell on his bicycle. Every time he rang it, he'd be whisked away into a strange land of excitement and adventure. One day, he returned home late from a particularly exciting adventure in the strange land, and realized that the library shut in fifteen minutes. "If I don't get my books back today, I'll be fined!" he thought. So he jumped on his bicycle with the magical bell and set off.

On the way, he had to stop at some traffic lights that had turned red. "Oh no!" he thought, "I'll be late!" Just as the lights were about to change, a little girl walked by. "You're ever so famous," she said. "Please may I have your autograph?" So the boy with the bicycle bell had to write his name in her autograph book, but by the time he'd done so the lights were back at red. "If I hurry, I might still make it," he said to himself as he waited.

A little further along the road, a man leaped out and took a photograph. The boy with the bicycle bell was completely surprised, and the bright flash from the camera stopped his eyes from working for a few moments so he couldn't see where he was going. He ran into a litter bin. "Thanks!" said the photographer. "I work for a newspaper, and this picture will look splendid next to the story of your latest adventure!" The boy with the bicycle bell stood up, straightened the handlebar on his bicycle, and sped off. "If I really, really hurry, I may still get there before they close!" he hoped.

Suddenly, an old lady walked out in front of him! How she got to be old with an attitude to road safety like that, the boy with the bicycle bell didn't know, but he was going to hit her if she didn't spot him! He reached for his bicycle bell, then realized that ringing it would whisk him off to the strange land where spoons dance and the sky is striped. "Look out!" he shouted. "Eh?" said the old lady, moments before the boy with the bicycle bell knocked her over.

By the time he'd finished explaining everything to the policeman, the library had been shut half an hour.¹

Now even though the author, Richard A. Bartle, suggests that the moral goes something like: "*Don't trust anything magical unless it has an "off" switch,*" I think there are several, more significant, lessons we can learn from this short fiction (besides the more obvious: "best laid plans..."); namely, that we shouldn't let vain distractions get in the way of our goals; and, that we'd be better off prioritizing what really matters in life and not stressing over the little things. For instance, I might first say to the boy, remember what's important. Don't stop for the autograph signing or the photo-op. Keep pressing forward. Secondly, and somewhat contrarily, I might even say, don't worry about those books. There is an alternative. Go tomorrow, pay the fine, and relish in the thrill of your adventure just a bit longer. Meditate on it, reflect, and process it. After all, who knows when you'll next have time to escape, even if it is just the ring of a bell away?

*The ring of a bell/the push of a button...*hmm, you see, the boy's ultimate dilemma correlates all-too-well to the narratives we ourselves weave, especially in the summer-time, or whenever it is that we just get back from a vacation (or a Mission Trip, for that matter). Because what seems to always happen, if you're anything like me or the boy, is that the sensation of Living (and I mean, truly Living) that comes from an exciting adventure to a strange area, dries up like the morning dew when reality sinks in and we're summoned back to the homebound grind. Back to our work. Back to our chores. Back to the distractions of the mundane where we busy ourselves with tediums that matter not at all, or at least, very little in the grand scheme of things. It's like the entirety of modernity conspires against us such that we linger

¹ *The Boy with the Bicycle Bell* by Richard A. Bartle, 1999.

not a moment not too long in that blissful state of reprieve. The scents and scenes of our adventures are immediately replaced with the daily minutiae, like pages of emails in need of answering (or books needing to be returned to the library); that it's as if the excursion was more a deterrence to our life rather than an enricher of it.

And isn't that just sad?

We toil and we toil just so we can store enough time and earn enough money to get away. And ultimately, we get away only to return to toil even more than we did before we escaped. And worse, we toil to such great lengths when we are still relatively young, that we sacrifice our health, all so we can have enough money when we are old to then pay premiums on healthcare.² O vanity of vanities, all is vanity!

In Season One of the television show, *LOST*, in the episode *Hearts and Minds*, the character John Locke is approached by the character Boone. Boone notices that Locke is once again sitting and staring at the Hatch door he found buried in the ground, just as he's been doing for several weeks now. Boone then asks him if he ever intends to get to work, to toil a little, and actually do something about the door, or does he mean to just sit there and stare at it forever.

Locke replies: *"Ludovico Buonarrati, Michelangelo's father. He was a wealthy man. He had no understanding of the divinity in his son, so he beat him. No child of his was going to use his hands for a living. So, Michelangelo learned not to use his hands. Years later a visiting prince came into Michelangelo's studio and found the master staring at a single 18 foot block of marble. Then he knew that the rumors were true — that Michelangelo had come in everyday for the last four months, done nothing but stare at the marble, and then went home for his supper. So the prince one day asked the obvious — what are you doing just staring there? And Michelangelo turned around and looked at him, and whispered, "sto lavorando," (I'm working). Three years later that block of marble was the statue of David."*

Now your guess is as good as mine if any of that's historically true... it probably isn't, but does it matter? Doesn't it at least sound good? Moreover, doesn't it preach: that much can be done while yet still? That through *seemingly* doing nothing at all, enlightenment can yet be reached?

When I was a teenager I seemed to grasp this. Back then, I seemed to better understand. My parents can attest that one day I told them I wanted nothing more in life than to be an old man sitting in a lawn chair waving at cars and greeting strangers on the street. I'm not kidding. That's all I wanted. There was a guy in our neighborhood who did just that and it seemed ever so liberating. I didn't want to be an accountant, a lawyer, an athlete, or even a minister. Nope, just some guy who had nowhere to be and nothing on his schedule, who merely enjoyed greeting, meeting, and talking to people.

Now, you might think that's the equivalent of romanticizing the life of a bum, but I'd like to take a second and disagree. For starters, I should say that it's not like I resisted all work. After all, I had a job at Walgreens before I even hit puberty. But more to the point, I had a professor once tell me that the greatest occupation in the world was once held by the notable Socrates who did nothing all day but bother people in the city squares with his questions and observations. More precisely then, rather than a bum, that's who I wanted to be – Socrates.

You see, as a child I think I understood something more profound than my parents ever gave me credit for. That so much of life, and what we choose to do with our lives, is unnecessarily laborious and needlessly wearisome. It's all kind of like white-noise filling up the space. Distractions, vanities, and white-noise. And all of that noise gets in the way of hearing and following through on what really matters in life. And often, what really matters, manifests in the most basic of gestures and miniscule of events. Like sitting and listening at the feet of Jesus.

Man... I truly believe I had it all figured out when I was younger.

But that was back then. And now than I'm an adult, much has changed.

One might think that age and experience guarantees a surplus of wisdom. But one would be wrong.

² Paraphrase of a quote from Ghandi

Perhaps like you, and certainly like Martha, I've lost the thread.

For like Martha, I too am caught up in the system. An everyday busybody who is merely busy for the sake of being busy. A day spent sitting around feels like a day wasted. Like the boy with the bicycle bell returning his library books there's simply too much that distracts me; too much that I think I need to do, and so, I try to cram it all in, in as little a time as possible. I live, breathe, and function by what my calendar tells me to do. *I have no say in the matter.* I say "yes" to things I know I shouldn't; and I often toil away at meaningless tasks, sitting behind screens until my eyes are weary and bloodshot.

Am I alone or does this also sound like you?

And usually at the end of the day (mostly I mean my free-days) I wonder just where all the time went and what precisely I accomplished. Sure, I was out all day and went from A to B to C to D, and crossed things off my to-do list, but in the end, what for? The sun rises and the sun sets and I'm back in bed again with a pit in my stomach thinking it's all just slipping away, flying by, and I'm not really doing anything at all. I'm not ringing any bells. I'm just killing time. And even though I'm self-aware and attuned to it, as evident perhaps by this sermon, I yet can hardly avoid it. So many of my days are interrupted by the old lady in our first tale: she ain't moving out of my way and I can't swerve in time. But really, what alternative do I have? Things have to get done. Bills need to get paid. Vincent needs to get walked. Seth must be fed. Etc. Etc. Etc.

And this this mindset, this reality, well, it disrupts my marriage. Austin confessed something to you last week, so I guess it's my turn this week. Next week, it's Cindy's chance. So I confess. I confess that I often perceive that I'm the only one doing something in my house (have you also felt this way?). Yes, behind the scenes of the photos I post of our beautiful little family, we're not perfect. Not perfect at all. And I guess what I really mean by that is that I'm not perfect. I'm not easy to live with. I get bothered when Anya chews her apples too loudly. Seth's screaming can frustrate me to no end. I can't stand being late to an event or a walking into our messy house, and I get visibly agitated when Anya appears to be contributing to both, or so I perceive. Like Martha, I sometimes look upon my wife as she did Mary, and whisper, "Lord, do you not care that my wife has left me to do all this work by myself?" And I dare to say that, and I dare to think that, even though she does more than her fair share, especially with our son.

Sometimes I come downstairs and Anya is just kind of like staring, like Michelangelo at that marble. In her case, she's either staring into Seth's eyes or off somewhere into the distance. And I think that's it, she's finally dreaming of getting away from me. But really, what she is doing, she tells me, is meditating. Approaching peace, bliss, enlightenment. And she gets there, she says, by being still. By doing nothing. By sitting in silence at the foothold of the universe, listening and attempting to discern how it wishes to guide her both that day and going forward.

If not for her grace, I could have made a real mess of things already. For truly I can now see that all of the stupid little things that I used get bent out of shape about, well, they never mattered at all, not even a flea's breath in the grand scheme of things. Instead of me, the minister, it's been my Buddhist wife who figured it out, just like Mary was the one who figured it out, and both of them, are better off for it. There is an alternative to this system of busyness we've created for ourselves. And it is found in the openness to those quiet moments where we can glimpse life for the one thing it truly is: a shade, a reflection of divinity.

My friends, the gospel text is only five verses long. Just 5 verses. And Jesus' message couldn't be any more direct. "Martha, Martha" he says, "Brian, Brian" he says... you are worried and distracted by many things, but there is only one thing."

Come and sit with me. Come and be still. Linger. And listen to my good news, for in that, there is life. True life.

So, calm down. Slow down. And be at peace.

Amen.