

“But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.’”

The word for the week is distraction whose first definition is “something that diverts attention.” I presently am thinking of an 11-week-old puppy on a writing sabbatical; but that particular example aside, sometimes it seems as though the hours of any given day are filled with nothing but distractions. You get out of bed meaning to do one thing and, while you are brushing your teeth, you find yourself thinking about a half-dozen other things that need doing before you can give your attention to the first thing. Then as the coffee is perking, you check your emails if you are old like I am; and if not, you respond to the texts that are waiting for a reply while also catching up with overnight posts on Facebook until you either forget or are full of excuses about why you are never going to have time to do what you set out to do when you woke up and rolled out of bed.

This sounds like a complaint, but I think we almost glorify our distracted lives--as though our significance has something to do with being overwhelmed by the many things on our plate. Someone asks, “How are you?” and you reply with a dizzying list of obligations and things not done that you ought to have done. Or someone is pouring out her heart to you and, as you nod sympathetically, you realize that your attention is not on her but on your silenced cell phone vibrating in your pocket that might be about something more important than this friend’s problems. Or perhaps you are in the pew with a text message vying with the preacher for your attention—at least that is what the choir reports as they peer over the railing. Guess who gets your attention every time! Then there is the way your mind races late into the night with worries that keep you from the sleep you need in order to concentrate when you wake the next morning.

This, by the way, is not a problem that only visits multi-tasking youth or the family flying in a thousand different directions or adults in the prime of life who work 24/7. Those enjoying their so-called retirement years are equally prone to days defined by distractions rather than by paying attention. As one nearing those years myself and given all the medical news this week about subjective cognitive decline, I might add that there is little comfort to be had in the assurance of friends who say my inability to remember names or a forgotten appointment is caused not by early onset dementia but by having too many things on my mind.

In a word, distraction has become a way of life, so much so that there is a whole new orientation to life called mindfulness that promises to redeem our overwrought time from insignificance. The Penn Program on Mindfulness holds classes in the Center on the Hill and will help you cultivate a nonjudgmental, non-reactive sense of self. Taken, in large part, from the Buddhist tradition of meditation, mindfulness teaches you to pay attention intentionally to the present moment so that when you are brushing your teeth in the morning, you are aware of the taste of the toothpaste, the feel of the brush on your gums, the light streaming in the window, your breath going in and out and so on and so forth. As you might imagine, being present to the moment enhances your well-being, increases your focus and productivity, improves communication in relationships--you can even lose weight and get healthy by eating mindfully!

From what people tell me who have taken the course, mindfulness not only can change your life but can even change how your brain works. Curiously, the founders of this movement are quick to say that mindfulness has nothing to do with religion. Even so, I think Jesus’ council about considering the lilies of the field and mindfulness need not be mutually exclusive.

Maybe the one thing Martha needed, had it been offered at her synagogue in the first century, was a course on mindfulness. Perhaps had she had been mindful of the feel of the vegetables on her fingers as she chopped them, the smell of the kibbeh smoking on the fire pit, the sun baking her skin, the precious water cold from the well spilling over her dusty feet—had she been able to pay attention to the present moment nonjudgmentally (is this what people mean when they say they are spiritual but not religious?)--she might have been content in the kitchen, much like her sister Mary was content paying attention to Jesus in the next room. Instead Luke tells us what Jesus will tell Martha to her face: she was distracted by her many tasks.

Who knows how long Mary had been rapt by Jesus’ words when Martha finally reaches the limit of her selfless tolerance and interrupts to ask Jesus if he cares that Mary has left her to do all the work by herself. I imagine Jesus saying nothing at first, but only looking Martha in the eye, hoping the light might dawn. Oblivious to his presence, Martha instead orders Jesus to tell Mary to help her now! When Jesus does respond, his words must have sounded condescending to this already distraught woman. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” Then, as if to add injury to insult, Jesus says, “Mary has chosen the one needful thing, which will not be taken away from her.” Really? If you ask me, I am pretty sure Martha was distracted less by her tasks than by her

anger at the unmindfulness of her sister and of Jesus. Here she is slaving away selflessly in the kitchen while they are lollygagging in the living room.

But Luke really is not asking me. He is telling me, through my complete identification with Martha, to step back from the many things that worry and distract me in order to be present to the one needful thing in my life. Period. End of story. Martha is left on her own to figure out for herself what the one needful thing might be and so are we.

I may be wrong, but I think in the end Luke's story is not about paying attention to the moment nor is it about the just division of household chores. It is about paying attention to God's Word. Mary chooses to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to the word of God Jesus is and is speaking to her. The church's confession would be that, in him, God has come near and is addressing her. Likewise the church's witness is that God has come near and is addressing us here and now in the word written and proclaimed and acted out at the font and around the table. "The presupposition of the Bible is not that God is but that God spoke," Karl Barth once told a classroom of preachers. "We are directed not to God himself, but to God communicating himself. What makes scripture holy scripture is not the correctness of the prophetic and apostolic statements and thoughts about God but the I-Thou encounter, person to person, about which these [words] tell us." In the presence of God's word, one thing is needed: our attention.

After three months of letting go the worry and distractions that excuse me from doing the one needful thing you have called me to do, I have committed myself anew to listen for your sake to God's address in Scripture. I was helped in my understanding of that commitment by a remarkable man named Antonino. No, he was not an Italian suitor, but the prior of the Dominican Cloister of San Marco, the Order of Preachers, in the fifteenth century when Fra Angelico, a Dominican cleric, was proclaiming the word in paint on the walls of each cell. As prior and eventually as Archbishop of Florence, Antonino became acutely aware of a crisis in the church. The problem, he wrote, was twofold: the "neglect on the part of the preacher who does not aim high enough"; but of equal concern was, in his words, "the hearer who shall have heard the word of God carelessly."

As for the preacher who does not aim high enough, Antonino's words returned me to the words of Karl Barth that chasten me every time I am tempted to give in to our sound-bite culture. Barth wrote that "If preaching does not begin with the presupposition that [you] want to be taken more seriously by the [proclamation of God's word] than you take [your]self, namely, with *total* seriousness, then it is setting its sights too low, and its effort is meaningless no matter how great its sound and fury." As for the hearer who listens carelessly, in fifteenth-century Florence there were no social media to blame for a person's limited attention span. There was and is only the idolatry of the human creature who is prone to pay attention to every other thing in life save the one needful thing: namely to the God who graciously comes to this house still in Jesus Christ. Then as now, we welcome him in the door only to give in willfully to all the things that distract us from listening, really listening, to his word.

It occurs to me that if the mindfulness folks are scientifically correct—that the practice of paying attention to the moment changes the way the human brain works, then how much more will paying attention to God's presence and God's address change how our human hearts work? Who might we become individually and as a church if we quit our worries and distractions, our complaints and excuses for just these few minutes on a Sunday morning, and chose to sit humbly, vulnerably, attentively before the words of Scripture, even before the words of a preacher trying her best to reach high enough, in order to listen for what God is saying to us?

New Testament scholar Joel Green writes that "Jesus' encounter with Martha and Mary clarified the nature of the welcome he seeks not only for himself but also for his messengers—that is, for all who participate in the drawing near of God's dominion." In sum, he seeks a hospitable community that is marked by the attention the community gives to God's Word and presence among them. For a church that chooses instead to be "worried and distracted by many things" inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shallows of frantic potlucks, anxious stewardship campaigns, petty gossip or complaints and programs designed simply to perpetuate the institution.

On the other hand, when a congregation is led to position itself at Christ's feet—reading Scripture together and asking after its meaning, listening to substantive sermons and wrestling like Jacob for God's blessing, studying and nurturing a faith that seeks understanding, then even the details of the common life begin to resound with good news. Luke's casual setting of a home for this story reminds me that every encounter is potentially an occasion to listen together for God's word: when an off the cuff remark at a dinner table provides the opening for a conversation about life's meaning and purpose or when the physical vulnerability that has landed you in a hospital bed leads to a confession concerning a crisis of faith or when a meeting agenda is laid aside so that we might ask anew what God would have us be and do.

You and I are in the service of Christ as, by his grace, we forget ourselves and are found listening at his feet for his word. No doubt when dinner was finally served that night at Martha and Mary's home, the guest was revealed, in the breaking of bread, to be their hospitable, humble, hidden host.