

## **Luke 10:38-42**

<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."

Last week was a very busy week. Immediately after worship, we began to load the van, check our lists for what was needed, wait for a few runs home to retrieve forgotten items, and then finally we set out to our mission trip with the youth to Chattanooga. By the time we got on the road, we were all already hungry, so we stopped in Danville for the CiCi's lunch buffet. By the time we were done and back on the road, we were already running late.

We were less concerned with being late when, just 7 miles north of the Tennessee/Kentucky border, we heard a pop of one of the tires on the van. I managed to navigate through the traffic to get the van on the shoulder of the road, and we quickly had the youth get out and walk to a shaded area off the interstate. Stephanie and I worked for an hour and a half trying to get the tire changed, but we couldn't get the van up on the jack. Finally, we were able to reach roadside service for help, and we joined the youth on the side of the road to wait.

After we finally had the spare on the van, we asked about where we might get another spare tire, and the roadside assistance people recommended a Wal-Mart another 40 or so miles down the road. In all, we went about 8 miles out of our way to find this Wal-Mart – better safe than sorry – only to learn that our 1987 van requires a very unusual tire size, and any store would have to order it. The roadside assistance people thought we would be ok to make it to Chattanooga, so we got back on the Interstate and kept driving. We made it about 20 miles further when we heard the familiar sound of tire malfunction, and we once again had to pull over to the shoulder of the road. Just north of Knoxville now, we had only 3 good tires and a van full of 9 hot, sweaty, and tired people.

We started making calls, got a tow truck on its way, and began to figure out what we were going to do. Mary Weber started calling contacts from Knoxville, and soon we got a call from a couple who lived relatively close to where we broke down. They were willing to come pick us up in their cars, and figure out what to do from there. We packed their two cars with all of our bodies and most of our stuff, and headed back to their house. We all spent the night there, and then the next morning made calls to see about renting another van or getting new tires for our old van. Finally, we were able to get two tires – the only two of this size that could be found in the greater Knoxville area, and by lunchtime we were once again on our way.

Once we finally arrived, we had already had more than a full week's worth of stress and activity, but of course we had a full week of activity ahead of us, too. Our schedule for the week kept us busy almost constantly from 7am or earlier until 10:30 or 11 at night. The theme for the week, which was carried out in morning devotions, evening worship time, and church group time, was "More or Less." One day the theme was "More be, less do," and we talked about all of the things that can distract us from spending time in devotion to God. Of course it was kind of ironic that we were talking about the need to be still, but all we were doing was going, going, and going some more!

All of our activity made me think of this story of Mary and Martha. There are many things that keep us busy and many things that distract us in our lives, and most of us probably need the reminder that we need to make time to rest at Jesus' feet. Then again, there is so much work to be done. Somebody has to cook the meals, clean the house, and pay the bills. Once we get those things taken care of, there is still more to be done, always more to be done. It is hard not to worry over all that we have to do, even as we get distracted by all the things we are doing.

The story of Mary and Martha was also the reading for Wednesday evening at the mission trip. The youth said some of the things that keep them distracted include video games, email, television, and talking on the phone. All those things that are good to enjoy, easily become addictive and choke out the important things.

We had a week where we did without them and it was a relief in many ways. You know what I mean because you've had times where you got away from it all.

We know we need to stop every now and then, to rest, to take care of ourselves, and to focus more on God and less on our busy-ness.

But this story isn't just about taking time to be still and enjoy God's presence. Martha is taking care of business, but she is also practicing hospitality – a virtue in her Jewish faith and in our own Christian faith. When someone important comes to visit, we want to roll out the red carpet, to do all we can to make them feel at home, and to make them relax. We received this royal treatment from our guardian angels in Knoxville. Jean and Ron are members of First Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, and have been good friends of Doug and Anna Gray Slagle's for years. When they heard we were in distress the second time in their neck of the woods, they immediately jumped in their two cars to drive out and pick us up. They had just one guest bedroom, but they made room for us on couches and air mattresses to accommodate all 9 of us in their condo. They ordered pizzas for all of us, since we hadn't yet had dinner, and in the morning, Jean even made us pancakes to order – blueberry, chocolate chip, and plain. Through their busy hospitality, they showed us God's love in their service.

Much of the work that we do is good work. God created us with bodies that are capable of working, and calls us to work in our daily lives and through the

mission of the church. God ordains our work, and so the work in and of itself is not a problem. **The problem comes into play when the work that we are called to do becomes a distraction or something that consumes our time and energies with hurry and worry. The problem is that we become too focused on the work, and we lose our focus on the reason that we work – out of love for and devotion to God.**

We definitely felt this tension in our mission trip last week. There were a number of different sites across the city where youth were volunteering. Some worked in a food bank, others at a Head Start program, others at a nursing home, and many worked with children in various places across the city. Then there were a couple of work crews, including part of our group, that went to Audobon Acres, a nature preserve and a spot on the Trail of Tears Heritage Trail. There we spent 3 very hot and sweaty hours pulling out privet and carrying it out of the woods to a huge brush pile. Privet is the devil. It really is. But to nature lovers it is better known as an invasive species, a tree-like weed, that basically took over the forests about 10 years ago when southern pine beetles attacked many of the taller and older trees. Privet grows very quickly and it can grow quite tall and big. It uses up the resources and crowds out the native species and larger trees, and it has to be removed with the whole root. We all worked very hard pulling and hauling the privet out of the forest, and it was easy to become consumed by the work without

thinking of what we were doing as mission. We also had certain chores throughout the week at the housing site, including preparing or cleaning up meals, or cleaning the building. These too seemed more like chores than serving God – a distraction from everything else we were doing. We had to remind ourselves that we were working not for the sake of accomplishing necessary tasks, but that everything we were doing was out of our love for and devotion to God. That’s what made ordinary tasks our mission work.

It’s easy to get caught up in the details of our tasks and forget that even in our work, we can worship God. Even in our Session meetings, in the hours spent planning, preparing for, and cleaning up after church dinners, in the painting or yard work or maintenance of the property, and in other items of church business, we might be tempted to worry so much about the details that we forget why we are doing it in the first place – in grateful response to God’s extravagant love for us.

There once was a man, Brother Lawrence. He was a Carmelite monk in Paris in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and after his death, his writings and sayings were compiled into a book, “The Practice of the Presence of God.” Brother Lawrence was poor and uneducated, and so even in the monastery, rather than becoming a cleric, he spent his life working in the kitchen of the monastery, cooking and cleaning. Even though his daily tasks were ordinary and regarded as lowly, he exuded happiness and peace. He noted that there were so many complicated ways

of approaching God, and of trying to grow spiritually, but perhaps the simplest way to approach God is to do all of our common business wholly out of love for God.

Martha asks Jesus to correct Mary and make her help in the kitchen, but God instead corrects Martha – not so much for her busy-ness, but because she is worried and distracted by her tasks. She has the opportunity to express her love and devotion to Jesus by her preparations for his visit, but instead of working out of love for God, she is frenzied, worried, and distracted. Mary, on the other hand, doesn't miss her opportunity to express her love and devotion to God, which she does by sitting at Jesus' feet.

Part of our practice of loving God requires us to respond like Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet. We do this by taking time out of our busy lives for worship on Sundays, or for Bible study or prayer throughout the week. But the other part of our practice – and a much greater portion of our time – involves lots of busy-ness and work, which too easily distracts us from our love for and devotion to God. But in all that we do, we can work with the motivation and focus that we are doing it because we love God. From washing the dishes to setting up tables and chairs; from going to a meeting to chairing a committee; from making dinner at home to making time to serve others who are in need; all of it gives us an opportunity to express our love for God, and to respond to God's love for us.

If we see every moment as a Holy moment, and a gift from God, that changes the way we spend our time. And if we see every task as a form of prayer itself, that changes the way we go about our daily business. It changes the way we relate to each other. If Martha had been thinking of her work as an outpouring of her devotion to God, I don't think she would have gotten upset with Mary for sitting at Jesus' feet, because both of them would have been responding in love and devotion, in the way that each was called. There are times to be busy, and times to rest. But in our activity, we are still called to abide in God. Otherwise we end up getting burnt out, feeling unappreciated and overworked, and harboring bad feelings towards others because they haven't carried their share of the load. Wouldn't it be better to drop all of those worries, to silence the distractions, and to do everything we do to the glory of God? In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.