

FOCUSED LIVING

Luke 10:38 – 42

Colossians 1:15 – 28

Sunday, July 21, 2013

In 1997 Steve Jobs came back to run Apple, the computer company he founded that had fired him twelve years earlier. When he came back, Apple was absolutely falling apart. Sales were *way* down. Their stock was worthless. They had lost over a *billion dollars* in the year before he came back, and they were literally 90 days from being out of business. This was one of the most innovative companies in the *world*, doing things with computers that people had never *imagined* before, and people had basically lost interest in what they were doing.

So when Jobs came back, he was in a meeting where people were trying to explain to him exactly what the company was doing; exactly what their *products* were. They had *twelve* different versions of the same computer, each with its own confusing number. No one knew what to buy. Finally Jobs shouted, “Stop! This is *crazy!*” He went over to a whiteboard and drew a horizontal and a vertical line to make a four-squared chart. Atop the columns he wrote, “Consumer,” and, “Professional.” By the two rows, he wrote, “Desktop,” and, “Portable.” He said, “We’re going to make *four* products. A desktop computer for the average person and one for professionals. A portable computer for the average person and one for professionals. That’s it. Instead of making a *bunch* of things really *poorly*, we’re going to make *four* things really well.”

This ability to focus saved Apple. The year before, they had lost over a billion dollars. The next year, they made over \$300 million in profits, on their way to eventually becoming the most valuable and innovative company in the world.¹

¹ Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs*, pg. 337-339.

Jesus is at the house of Martha and her sister Mary. *Martha* is running around, getting the *food* ready, getting the *table* prepared, cleaning up, making sure Jesus is comfortable; doing all the things a good host is supposed to do. *Mary*, instead of *helping* her, is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to what he is saying.

Martha goes to Jesus and says, "Lord, she has left me to do all the work by myself! Tell her to *help* me!" Jesus says, "Martha. Martha. (He has to say her name *twice* to get her to stop and pay attention.) You are worried and distracted by *many things*. There is need of only *one* thing. *Mary* has chosen the *better part*, which will not be taken away from her."

You're distracted by *many things*. You need to *focus*.

It's not like what Martha was doing was *bad* or *wrong*. It was all *good* stuff that a good host does. It's just that she was doing *too much*. She was distracted. Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "You are *focused* on many things," because you *can't* focus on many things. Martha was all over the place.

And this is something we see *all the time* with these two sisters. In John 11, Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus is sick, and Jesus comes to heal him, but it's too late. Lazarus is already dead. Martha hears that Jesus has arrived, and she runs out to meet him. And she goes to work, trying to get Jesus to perform a miracle and raise her brother from the dead. She runs back to her house and tells Mary – who has been waiting there the whole time – that Jesus wants to see her. It says that when she heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and wept.

The whole time, Martha is *on* her feet, running around trying to get things going, while Mary is *at* the feet of the Lord.

A little later, Jesus is back at the house of Mary and Martha. They are having another dinner party for him. It says, “Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume...anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.” Again, Martha is *on* her feet, running around making plans and preparations, while Mary is *at* the feet of the Lord.

In Matthew’s gospel, on Easter Sunday, it says, “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, *took hold of his feet*, and worshipped him.” Mary is *at* the feet, and again, Martha missed everything.

Every time we see Mary and Martha in scripture, Martha is *on* her feet, and Mary is *at* the feet. To be *at someone’s feet* meant that you learned from them, you were taught by them, you received what they had to give you. It was the traditional posture of a student with a teacher. Paul talks in the New Testament about being “brought up...at the feet of Gamaliel,” who was a famous rabbi who served as Paul’s mentor. You would literally sit at your teacher’s feet and look up to them and just soak in everything they said to you.

So when Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet, she is learning, growing, understanding. But Martha doesn’t get that because she is not *at* the feet. She is off taking care of all this other stuff.

Martha is *on* her feet. Mary is *at* the feet. Martha is distracted, but Mary is focused.

A lot of times we take the meaning of this story to be that we need to stop running around so much, stop doing all these other things that are distracting us from Jesus, and focus our lives on him. That sitting and listening is better than going and doing. That's what this seems to say.

But look at where this story fits in Luke's gospel. Last week, we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is immediately before this story. A lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him this parable, and then ends with the words, "Go and do likewise." So Jesus' message there is, "Go and *do*."

But Jesus' message *here* seems to be exactly the *opposite*. Martha *is* going and doing. And Jesus says to *her*, "Sit and listen." Two stories, right next to each other, one telling us to go and *do*, the other telling us to sit and *listen*. Which is it? Are we supposed to be like *Mary*, or are we supposed to be like *Martha* (or the Samaritan)? Is our faith supposed to be *contemplative*, or is our faith supposed to be *active*?

Fred Craddock is a preacher, author, and professor, and he writes about this story, and he says, "If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to *us*, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be, 'Yes.'"²

Mary represents *contemplation*, and Martha represents *action*, and our tendency is to put those two at *odds*; to position them as *opposites*. But we have to remember that they are *sisters*. Even though they are *different*, they *still go together*.

² Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Biblical Commentary*, pg. 152

In the case of the Good Samaritan, Jesus talks about this man lying bloodied and beaten on the side of the road, while two priests walk by and do nothing. They *know* the law, they *know* about mercy and helping those in need, but they do nothing. So in *that* story, *listening* without *doing* is empty. In the case of Mary and Martha, *doing* without *listening* is equally empty.

It's like Jesus is saying, "You can't just do one or the other." There has to be a *balance*.

Listening *and* doing.

There is a Hebrew word that is very significant in the Jewish faith. That word is *shema*. It's the first word in one of the most important Jewish prayers. It traditionally gets translated as, "hear" or, "listen." The prayer begins, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." But in Hebrew, *shema* actually means something *deeper* than just *hear* or *listen*. It has connotations of *doing*. It doesn't just mean *listen*. It means *listen* and *do*.

Because if you *listen* and don't *do*, then what's the point? And if you *do* but don't *listen*, you can be doing all the right things, for all the wrong reasons (or for no reason at all). As people of faith, we aren't just called to sit around and *listen* all day long and never *do* anything. We are called to *act* in ways that transform the world. But our *action* has to be *focused* and *grounded* in something, or else, like Martha, we're just all over the place.

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians that we heard, talks about this focus. He talks about Jesus as the image of the invisible God, the *invisible* made *visible*; that Jesus shows us who God is and what God is like. And he talks about how *in him*, all things hold together. All things are *grounded* and find their *focus* in Christ. Paul talks about how *this* is what *he* is focused on and grounds him in all his action. This whole thing is just, "Christ, Christ, Christ, Christ, Christ,"

and Paul says, “For *this* I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.” It is for *this* that I *do*. Because I am *grounded* and *rooted* and *focused* on Christ, I *act*, so as to share him with others.

The question this poses to *us* is, what are we *focused* on? *Are* we focused?

As individuals, it is *so easy* to get caught up in the busyness of life and the busyness of each day. So many of us are pulled in a million different directions; between family, work, friends that we want to keep up relationships with, sporting events, school, we are *all over the place*. It is *so easy* for us to end up like Martha, running from one thing to the next before we find ourselves completely overwhelmed, and *then* we turn to Jesus and say, “Hey, aren’t you going to help me out here?”

As a *church*, it is so easy to get caught up in the busyness of being the church. Programs, committee meetings, mission trips, Bible studies and classes, finding volunteers to do all these things that *need* to be done, planning, preparation. It is easy for us to *lose our focus*. To forget *why* we’re doing all of that stuff in the first place. To lose sight of *why* we are, as Paul says, toiling and struggling.

As individuals and as the church, it is *so easy* to become *worried* and *distracted* by *many things*. But there is *need*, Jesus says, for only *one thing*. Him. In *him*, all things hold together; all things find their *focus*, their *center*. That doesn’t mean that all those other things we are doing are *bad*, and we need to stop *doing* them to just focus on Jesus 24 hours a day. You can focus and ground yourself in Christ, *while you are doing them*. *That* is the challenge of a life of faith.

A couple of years ago, I was teaching a confirmation class of seven girls. And a week before the class started, one of the parents came to me and said, “You know these girls all play in the local volleyball league, and come January, they’re all going to be gone for tournaments on Sunday mornings.” And I’m thinking, “Uh, *no*, I actually *didn’t* know that. So you mean they are going to be *gone* for *half the class*?”

So then we had to figure out what to do. And I said, “I don’t want to force these girls to *choose* between something they *really* love (volleyball) and something they might only be doing because their parents are *making* them.” Because if I say, “You have to choose one,” they’re going to choose volleyball. Instead we started thinking, “What if there was a way that they could go and play volleyball informed by all the stuff we’re teaching them here, and have all their actions there grounded in what it means to follow Jesus? What if part of their confirmation was living out their faith on the volleyball court, demonstrating patience and kindness and sportsmanship and self-control?”

What if instead of saying, “You need to stop *doing* so much,” we could say, “In Christ *all things* hold together. What if you can do all of that while *grounded* in him and *focused* on what it means to follow him in *all* that you do?” That it’s not just *what* you’re doing, but *why* you’re doing it and *for whom* you’re doing it.

What if it’s possible to be *at the feet* while you’re *on* your feet? To say, “This thing that I’m doing (working, parenting, school, grocery shopping, whatever), how can this help me to live out my faith in Jesus Christ and to show him to others?” Whatever I’m doing, how can I do it for Christ, as an outpouring of my faith in him?

As individuals, as a church, it is so easy for us to become worried and distracted by many things. But there is *need* for only *one* thing that grounds everything else and holds it all together and gives life focus. And what I would love for you to ask yourself this week, as you're going about all your busyness and all the things you need to do, what is your one thing that gives meaning and focus to everything else? What is your one thing? And how are you doing *whatever* you're doing in a way that is grounded in that?