

Worries and Distractions

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 16
2010

The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Church

Sunday, July 18,

Trinity Evangelical Lutheran

Genesis 18:1-10a; Psalm 15
Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A few years back I read that a great place and time to have quality conversation with your children is when you are chauffeuring them to the soccer field, to the music lesson, on the way to school or youth group. The idea is that because you're located within a few feet of one another in a confined space—held hostage together, as it were—at least until you arrive at one of the above-mentioned activities, you will have ample opportunity to talk with and listen to your child about important things.

Oookay. To be honest, if I attempted to have a serious, focused conversation with my kids in the van—the kind of conversation that requires thought, careful wording, probing questions, insightful answers—well, I'd be a menace on the highway! I cannot focus on driving and at the same time focus on intense discussions about future career goals, the frustrations of physics class, the argument they had with a friend, or their anxiety about final exams. I have to be stationary in order to have those kinds of critical conversations, or at the very least, someone else needs to be doing the driving—and not my kids, either. That article was wrong! It needs a label that reads: "Warning! Our idea may cause distraction. Do not attempt quality conversations while operating heavy equipment." While driving, I can talk about the weather. I can talk about sports. But nothing too intense. I cannot divide my focus in two.

Though many of us try. I'm not speaking about a modest amount of multi-tasking. I can eat an apple and check my e-mail at the same time. I can talk to my mother on the phone and start a load of laundry at the same time—as long as I don't drop the phone in the washer along with the dirty socks. We've learned how to multitask in the mundane areas. There is even a term coined by consultant and writer Linda Stone that the strategy we have in the Internet Age is something she calls "continuous partial attention." Many of us remain connected via phone, Internet, e-mail, twitter, Facebook, so we can collect information from all these sources at the same time. It's not necessarily a bad thing—this continuous partial attention—if what we're attempting to do is scan several areas in order to respond quickly to an opportunity. But I'm talking about "continuous full attention." To focus well on one important thing—and then extend that full attention onto additional important things simultaneously, meanwhile holding it all together? I don't know that it can be done.

Look at Martha in our Gospel lesson today. She is the hostess of a dinner where Jesus is present. Note Luke tells us she has welcomed Jesus into her home, and is busy preparing a meal for him to enjoy. She wants to do this. You have to love Martha here. Oh, I know she sounds snippy in this story, but her original goal was to provide gracious hospitality for Jesus. And that was a wonderful goal upon which to be focused. This was part of her culture—to provide hospitality for a guest—and she rightfully considers it an important task. Except she suddenly realizes she can't do it all. There are just too many things to focus on. Too many pots, too many dishes, it's too hot by the fire, she needs more water, and Martha finds herself overwhelmed by her tasks. Distracted by all the disparate things that need to be done. Worried that she cannot hold it all together. And because she is now worried and distracted, she loses her original focus, which was welcoming Jesus into her home, enjoying being with him. That focus has been forgotten. It lies scattered among the pots and jugs and dishes. The meal details become the thing, reign supreme, consume her, and she can not be attentive to her guest.

Now, go ahead and try to tell me you can't relate to her situation. I know too many of us who have too many irons in the fire. We're desperately trying to keep an eye on them all, focus on each one well.

You and I know people who are caregivers for a family member, and they are worried and distracted—managing a home, providing care 24/7, in need of a solid night's sleep, trying to hold it all together.

You and I know people who are struggling financially to keep their business solvent or hold onto their company job, and deciding what to pay first this month: The mortgage? The taxes? The college tuition bill? Where to put their financial focus?

You and I know people in this church who feel burdened and all alone in their commitment to a task in ministry here—they are worried that there are not enough volunteers, energy, money or time to succeed in the task they themselves are more than willing to take on and consider a vital part of our mission. And believe me, even church people can get a bit snippy when they are worried and distracted.

Remember how I said Martha, in her distraction, lost her original focus of welcoming Jesus into her home? Well, look at what happens when we get distracted...when we lose our focus. We flit from one activity to the next in manic mode, and discover we were never fully engaged in any of them.

In our caregiving duties, we neglect to look at the family member with love and affection. Instead, we're irritated with them. And then we feel guilty because we are irritated with them.

Or in our money troubles, we forget we have been blessed beyond measure in ways that are not material at all—our families, our friends, a world of beauty, God's love for us.

And we get so lost in the minutiae of church work that we lose sight of the One for whom we are gathered to praise, the One in whose name we are sent out to serve.

Like Martha, there are days when we realize we cannot hold it all together. And we get snippy and anxious, distracted and frustrated. We threaten to quit, walk away, or just want to go back to bed and pull the covers up over our heads.

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” Do you hear the love in Jesus’ voice? He’s chiding Martha, to be sure, but chiding her with gentleness and love. Our Lord knows we worry, get distracted, lose focus, become snippy. Our Lord knows we cannot possibly hold it all together. Only **he** can hold it all together.

When Paul wrote to the Colossians he made that truth abundantly clear. In our second lesson today, we read Paul’s words which start off as a tribute to Jesus Christ. Paul writes that Jesus is the image of the invisible God—in other words, when we see Jesus, we see and know God. Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. Everything has been created through him and also for him. And then, Paul adds, in Jesus Christ “all things hold together.” Here, as Paul describes this Jesus who is ruler of the cosmos, you and I can almost visualize our Lord holding together the universe—its stars and planets and galaxies, our own planet with its lands and seas, the kingdom to come, and even time itself. But bring that same thought down to the day-to-day activities of God’s people—our work and play, our families and friends, our community of faith—and visualize how Jesus holds even these things together. Then understand that Jesus’ words to Martha are his gentle chiding of us. You can go ahead and fill in your own name, but Jesus is saying to me, “Nancy, Nancy, you are worried and distracted by many things. Let me hold all these things together for you.”

Jesus says to Martha, “...there is need of only one thing.” Maybe he means she only needed to prepare one dish. Maybe Jesus likes tuna noodle casserole. Or maybe Jesus is simply reminding her that **he** is the one thing. The One who deserves continuous, full—and not partial—attention. For if Jesus Christ is really lord of the cosmos, lord of our life here, and lord of our life in the world to come, then he remains forever and always our focus. And when we focus on him and what he has to say to us, we will discover our lives are filled with the good news that Jesus Christ has come to be with us. He brings value and meaning to even the smallest daily activity. He brings strength and peace and guidance. And above all, he promises us that while you and I might not be able to do it all, he will so work his holy power in our lives that what we do in his name will be enough. **AMEN.**

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