

“Distractions”
(sermon given 7/18/10 by Scott Jansen)
Luke 10:38-42

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[Prayer for Illumination] O God, when Joshua asked the Israelites to choose this day whom they would serve, they chose you, but often waived. We have also chosen to serve you. May our focus and determination be at least as strong as theirs was. Amen.

Our lesson from Luke's gospel is a familiar story, though it's certainly not a common favorite. Listen now for God's word for you....

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister, named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

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."

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, 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."

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

We just had a fantastic Strawberry Social on Wednesday, so I want to start out by giving a round of applause to all the Marthas in our congregation..... Wasn't that great? So many people were willing to bake cakes or serve cakes or strawberries or ice cream. Hospitality is a huge task requiring many hours of dedicated work. So, what kind of insensitive MAN would choose to preach on this passage only days after our Strawberry Social????

Sometimes the lectionary gives you lemons..., so you make lemonade.... Does this passage say that all those folks who worked in kitchens last week, worked because they love the church, because they wanted to please God by making God's church into a place of hospitality—that all those folks were wrong to do that? No. Let me be

clear. That is not what this passage is saying. Martha was one of Jesus' best friends in the world. She was a good and caring person who was very much loved by our Lord. Martha is a good name to name your daughter.

Not only that, but any way that you serve God is just as valid and blessed as any other way that you serve God. Serving on the Fellowship Committee is just as important as serving on the Worship Committee. There is no ordering of our elders—no ranking of them from most important to least important. There isn't any choosing of "the better part" when you're deciding which committee to serve. That is not what this passage means....

Nor is it saying that women should be able to serve as pastors. I've heard that one from some scholars. Just because Mary sat in the classroom and learned about God, does not mean she was thereby qualified to become a pastor. You might wish that were a respectable interpretation, as I do, but the truth is, that would be pushing the text too far.

What this story really says is that life presents us with a great many potential distractions, and if we allow ourselves to become distracted, we will be separated from God. There are lots of things that you might think should take priority—lots of things that have some value. But there is only one thing that is truly "needed," according to Jesus. There's only one thing that Jesus would never, ever, give up. And if you had 24 hours left to live, there would be only one thing that should never be deleted from your "to do" list, namely, your relationship with God.

Ultimately, that's all that matters for all of eternity.... What is the state of your relationship with God???? Well? There are so many distractions. There's always some reason for putting God on a back burner.

We could list a million possible distractions. But today I want to talk about only two: pride and toys. If we could eliminate the distractions that fall under the categories of pride and toys, we'd be rid of the vast majority of them.

So let's start with pride, because that's the one in the text. Martha was the owner of the house, and as the elder sister, it was she who had welcomed Jesus and his companions. She had made the commitment to say to them, "come on in."

In Jewish culture, hospitality was a matter of pride. It was even a law. Failing to show hospitality could be a cause for a censure from

the priests, so it was always a topic of conversation.... We may not hold as much esteem for the gift of hospitality today, but I think we can at least relate to Martha. She wanted to make a good showing of her house. She didn't want to be known as the hostess who had dirty dishes, or who served inadequately washed vegetables.... Jesus traveled with a fairly large group, so there was much to do. And she had her pride.

She had her pride. And that's where her mind was.... Will they compliment the meal I prepare? Will they notice how well I folded the napkins? Will they spread the word all around town that Martha sure knows how to throw a good party? Will they recognize me and my talents????

To Martha, there seemed to be only one thing standing in the way of her success—Jesus was distracting her primary helper. Jesus was the problem. In Martha's assessment, Jesus caused the problem, so Jesus was responsible to fix it. “Don't you care, Lord? Don't you care? Tell her, command her, to help me!”.....

Martha thought that Mary was distracted, and Mary thought that Martha was distracted.... Often times, being distracted is just a matter of setting the right priorities. Martha had pride in her hospitality. And, I believe it is good to have a little pride in your gifts. Having pride means that you're more likely to actually use your gifts, and it also means that you're more likely to offer thanks to God for those gifts.

But pride can become a distraction when it rubs up against the top priority of the universe—the only one thing in the world that is actually... “needed”..... Pride is the original sin. Adam and Eve reached out because they wanted to be “like God.” Their sin wasn't eating the wrong fruit—their sin was in wanting to be “like God.”

When it comes to God, our pride has to accept a secondary significance. But we often let our pride become primary, and then it blocks us from a healthy relationship with God.

For example, you may go down to coffee fellowship one day and think to yourself, wow, what a spread! They must have worked for hours. I could never do such a fantastic job. If I volunteered for coffee fellowship, well, I would be embarrassed. It would hurt my pride. I wouldn't measure up to what these folks have done.... And so, your pride prevents you from volunteering.

The truth is, not everyone can be the best coffee fellowship hosts of the year. As Garrison Keillor sometimes reminds us, not everyone is above average. Some of our coffee fellowship hosts will

be below average. Can your pride endure such humiliation for God's sake??? Or does your pride prohibit you from ever putting yourself into such a position??????

Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet. She had not learned much Hebrew, since she was a Jewish female. She would not be as learned as the men in that circle. She could not have asked the most scholarly questions in that conversation. Yet she sat there and listened. How extraordinarily admirable.

But, how often do we think, "I can't go to that Human Scene class, because I don't know as much as those folks know. They are so much smarter than I am. It would be embarrassing to go." In twenty years of ministry, I've noticed a strange but almost universal phenomenon. People will come to adult ed. classes when they see that the topic is something about which they already know a whole lot. But if it's an unfamiliar subject, they stay away....

Why then will they go to class, on those few occasions? Do they go to class to learn? Or do they go to show off what they already know???? Or, let's turn it around—why do they stay away so often? What prevents them from learning about a topic about which they know very little? In a word, the roadblock is pride. "I'm afraid I'll ask a dumb question." A dumb question? Afraid? What are you afraid will happen???? See, that's not fear. That's pride. Pride is our biggest distraction from getting closer to God. That's why it's portrayed metaphorically as the original sin....

How else does pride corrupt our priorities so that it blocks us from God? Well, I see it quite often with parents dealing with their kids' activities. They want their kids to get into the finest colleges. Why? Is it just a matter of trying to get as much scholarship money as possible? Sometimes. Or, is it a matter of prestige???? Why does the kid's sport camp or music camp or drama camp take priority over going to worship the God who gave you life????

What if your kid doesn't get on the honor roll, or doesn't score in the top percentile on the ACTs? What terrible thing will happen? Will your kid be expelled from God's family? Will your kid not be able to live a happy life before dying and going to be with God? What is the tragedy if your kids don't succeed? What if your kid becomes a pastor, or finds some other way of never making an above average salary???? Let's be honest. We often say that it's for the kids' sake. But frequently, it's just the parents' pride. We don't want to be known

as a flunky parent, any more than Martha wanted to be known as a flunky hostess....

Yet, you don't need to graduate from high school to have a happy, full life.... If you don't believe that, go spend a week on the top of a mountain in Guatemala with some Mayan villagers.... I'm glad that our deacon Richard Crang is going to Colombia this week so he can come back and tell us what their lives are like, and give us a little perspective on some of the gigantic worries that we stress about.

Of course, many people won't go to the adult ed. class when Richard tells us about that, because the topic will be something they don't already know much about.... Or, because they will be out of town, trying to boost the prestige of their kids' accomplishments. So, they will be far too distracted to actually sit and learn just how ridiculous are all of their distractions....

What do you think? Is pride the biggest sin of all? The biggest cause of separation from God? How many folks stop going to worship when a church committee makes a decision that is different from what they thought best? "Because some fallible group of humans chose something that hurt my pride, I'm not going to worship God anymore."..... I hear such insanity every year around General Assembly time. As if my pride getting hurt could have something to do with whether or not God deserves my worship.....

Oh, Pride.... Or maybe we don't come to church when we're not looking our best, because of some blemish or hair disaster? As if God doesn't know what we really look like??? [me] Do we say, "I can't go to worship unless I have a white, short sleeve shirt, pressed and clean?"??? Jesus didn't wear clean clothes to worship, so why should I care? Well, I have my pride....

Martha had her pride. I have my pride. We all struggle with pride. And it's a distraction, the biggest distraction. But there's another distraction that has crept into our modern culture—one that didn't play much of a role in Jesus's culture under brutal Roman occupation. And that is the distraction of toys....

Toys come in all shapes and sizes. The electronic toys have flashing lights and beeping noises, so they are designed to grab our attention. That's one of my biggest distractions. I don't spend as much time in prayer with God as I should, because I'm playing on a computer game. Today we have games on cell phones. There's an electronic screen invading nearly every moment of our waking lives.

But those aren't the only kinds of toys that distract. I'm often distracted by chores around the house—fixing something that, to me, is like a puzzle. I needed a plumbing job done this week, and rather than call a plumber, I just puzzled it out myself. I had to read the instructions on the internet, and I worried about setting the house on fire with my propane torch, but I went ahead and did the job anyway. It would have taken a plumber a lot less time than it took me. But for me, that's fun. I've always enjoyed puzzles. So my old house, with all of its old problems, they're like a thousand little puzzles. My house is like a toy. So is my garden. You probably have different types of toys.

And, I don't think there's anything wrong with toys. I don't think there's anything wrong with playing in general. When we're playing with a toy, we're rejoicing in the goodness of God's creation. God commanded a Sabbath time for each of us—even for slaves. We're supposed to play with toys. However, sometimes they can become distractions. The Sabbath is one day out of seven. There is an appropriate balance. I don't feel bad about playing a game on my computer. I need that mental break. But I do feel bad when I play for too long.

Sometimes our toys consume more of our time than what God provided by the Sabbath. We are supposed to revel in Creation, but we're also supposed to work for God's Kingdom. If playing with toys means you don't have any time left to support the church's ministries, then perhaps you're spending too much time playing with your toys.

And, there are other distractions. Pride and toys are big ones. But anything that points you toward yourself instead of pointing you outward can become a distraction. You have to find the right balance. So don't go too far in the other direction, robbing yourself of all joys that make life worth living. God wants you to be happy.....

A little pride is good, but too much pride can become a distraction. Toys are good, but too much time with toys can be a distraction. It's all a matter of priorities. In the end, there is only one thing that is needed. Only one thing. Are you in a good relationship with God???? If yes, no worries. But, if not, then you may want to examine your distractions.

Amen.