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FIRST THINGS FIRST

Luke 10: 38-41

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La La Dada

Not too long after I moved to Washington to receive my first call as a pastor, I was sitting in our living room with my oldest daughter who was then 18 months old. We were watching a football game or rather, I was watching the football game and she was tugging on my index finger. "La la dada" she said to me over and over again as she tried to pull me out of my chair. "Sorry Lauren, Dada's busy" I told her as I moved her little body out of the way so that I had a better view of the football game. But she did not want to be denied, once again grasping my finger, tugging with all the force of her little body, 'la la dada'. But my eyes were glued to the television where I watched my team's quarterback drop back and fire an interception right into the arms of a defender, 'la la dada'. In disgust, I turned the TV off and reluctantly allowed my daughter to pull me out of my seat. She squealed with excitement as she hurried me over to the stereo, half running, half jumping. She took my hand and put it to the button that turned the turntable on. It was Christmas time and she wanted me to play her favorite song, "Deck the Halls". I complied and immediately the room was filled with music. Soon we were dancing, or actually I was dancing while holding her close to my chest the two of us singing "fa la la la la la la la la." "La la dada". It was a beautiful moment. Rejuvenating, life bringing, pure joy. One obviously that I remember to this day – but one that I almost missed if it were not for the persistence of my daughter in pursuing the moment with me.

I wish I could say that I learned my lesson 15 years ago and that ever since then I have been good to catch each moment for all that it is worth – to look into each choice that I was making and choose what was best instead of what appeared good at the time. But I can't and I haven't. And I have missed out – missed out on special moments with my children – with my wife – with friends – but most often, with the Lord. I have missed out. So have you. It's human nature, to choose what seems good, only to miss the best. Martha settled for good. Mary knew what was best.

Life is lost one distraction at a time

At the center of our text this morning are these two women. Type A Martha and type B Mary. Mary sat and Martha busily made preparations for her guests. Now we are tempted to look at this passage and say, "Well of course Martha is busy doing something, that's what type A's do." They have to always be doing something, planning something, accomplishing something and long before they are even done with one project they are already planning for and looking ahead to the next one. But that's not a fair judgment on Martha and the issue at hand goes much deeper than that. You see it was a high expectation and cultural obligation in the Middle East that visitors receive generous and warm displays of hospitality. Hospitality had a high value in that culture and still does today. A generous display of hospitality would include preparing and serving a meal for guests. So Martha was only doing what was expected of her. She was doing what anyone in Bethany would do if a visitor came to call. It was the right and proper thing to do. Mary, as the younger sister, should have been assisting so Martha's protest seems justifiable. "Lord, here I am working really hard and there is my sister hardly working, listening to you and you are letting her get away with it. Tell that slackard to get up, get out in the kitchen and help bake some cookies."

Jesus response is unexpected and if taken at face value suggests that hard work and preparation really isn't necessary. Hardly. Life doesn't work like that. No, Jesus isn't critical of Martha's work ethic – there is something else going on. The text tells us in verse 40 that Martha was **distracted** by all the preparations that had to be made. This word means that Martha had 'allowed her attention to wander,' and implies that Martha had tried to listen in on what Jesus was saying and do the things she was doing out of devotion to him but her attention wandered to other matters. She could not experience the love of the Savior **and** at the same time be angry with her sister. She could not hurriedly and frantically fly around the house doing everything that yet needed to be done **and** be at peace with what Jesus was saying. She could not mull over and dwell on how badly she was being taken advantage of **and** at the same time peer into the eyes of a selfless Savior. She was bound up, self-absorbed and that is what Jesus spoke against.

It is possible to worship without ever really having experienced worship; to pray and yet not to have prayed; to sing and yet just to have sung; to meditate and in the silence to simply hear silence. Our natural tendency is to roam, to wander, to stray and we bring this natural tendency to worship. I do. I fight that tendency in me when I pray – my mind wants to wander to the hundreds of things that I could have done, ought to get done, or shouldn't be doing. I struggle at times when I sing a hymn. I sometimes can't get my mind off the words and up into the heavens because I am still thinking about a conversation I had with someone just prior to worship or I'm thinking about an unmet need in ministry. To be distracted is to be undone from what Jesus wants to do in us at that moment. We're unworkable, unmoldable clay. There isn't anything that Jesus can do with us, because he doesn't have us – our attention – our heart – our mind. The truth is that Jesus is the only way to new life. He is the only possibility for wholeness and healing in life. When our attention wanders from Him, then we become what we are distracted by. If we become distracted by worry then we become a worrier. If we become distracted by success we become full of ourselves. If we become distracted by chronic pain and sorrow then we become hopeless.

Life is not lost by dying. Life is lost minute by minute, day by dragging day, in all the choices we face, when we make the choices that distract us from Jesus presence and so lead us to act in any one of a thousand small uncaring, self-absorbed, ways. That is where life is lost. We miss out – miss out on the life Jesus wants to pour into us.

Worship helps us to forget ourselves

This brings us to Mary. Now this is the first time that Mary appears on the scene in Luke's Gospel. We really don't know much about her – in fact we know nothing. A survey of the Scriptures reveals that in the three stories told about her in the Gospels she is either sitting at his feet, kneeling beside his feet or face down in front of his feet. What is that? It's devotion. It's gratitude. It's an act of faithfulness. But it's more – it's worship. It is wanting more than anything else to be in the presence of Jesus. To be with the only one who is wise enough to give us counsel and words to live by – the only one compassionate enough to give us peace and comfort – the only one who knows us enough to fill up our every void – the only one strong enough to cover our every weakness and shortcoming and set us free from guilt. Worship is wanting a fresh taste of his love and the assurance of his faithfulness that goes along with it. It's knowing all of this, wanting all of it and choosing it first. First things first – above all else – before all else – to choose Jesus and a life fully devoted to him. That's what Mary knew. That's what Mary wanted. And there was no way that Jesus was going to take it away from her.

Did you ever notice that the more we focus on our needs, our desires and our rights, the more unhappy we become. That truly miserable people are absorbed with themselves. Just look at

Martha. Almost nothing in life is more debilitating than our self-centeredness. It was William James who said “The only truly happy people I know are those who have found a cause greater than themselves to live for.” That’s true. Because it’s when we live for something bigger than ourselves that we lose sight of ourselves. We are no longer the center of our attention. This is the principle that Mary teaches us about Worship that helps us to forget about ourselves. Mary had chosen to sit with Jesus not because she was lazy or because she wanted to irritate her sister or because she could care less about the social pressure to be hospitable. It’s just that for Mary doing the good and socially acceptable thing like her sister, paled in comparison to the best thing in that moment which was to rest at Jesus’ feet in worship.

Several years ago my wife and I were in a young married group. Now be nice. I said it was several years ago. The group was about a lot of things. We were a support to one another. We prayed for one another. We learned about marriage and family principles and encouraged each other in those. But every night when we met, we began with worship. Some nights I could tell that worship was the last thing that some of our couples wanted to do. I saw them parking the car in the parking lot – the looks they would dart at each other – not daring to say anything aloud because – after all – they were at church. So they would put on their church face and come to the group where we would begin in worship. Reluctantly they would begin to sing but as one song gave way to the next, reluctance turned into compliance and compliance to surrender and surrender to renewal. Meeting after meeting couples would comment how they had begun the night mad at each other but by the end of our time together, couldn’t remember what it was that they were arguing about or why it was that they were arguing about it. God had given them a different perspective. And they left in a totally different place than when they first arrived. Have you ever experienced that – a new perspective as a result of a time in prayer – or personal bible study – or while praising God in worship? Is there something that you want a new perspective on here this morning and so to lose sight of yourself, your fear, your anxiety, your brokenness, your weakness? Truth is that there isn’t anyone of us who isn’t in this place this morning. If, for a moment, our thought life became public information, we would realize what good company we keep this morning. We are broken in some way, to some degree. And we come to worship to be remade.

Worship leads us to discover or re-discover Jesus

This brings us to Jesus, and for me, the most curious and obscure part of our text. Jesus was teaching, but we don’t know what he was teaching about. Luke doesn’t tell us. It’s much like when the woman was brought to Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery. Jesus drew something in the sand and all we can do is guess as to what it was. What do you think he was saying to Mary that day in Martha’s living room? Luke apparently doesn’t want us to know. Martha didn’t know. She was distracted. Only Mary knew, and with each word that Jesus spoke, she was drawn more and more to him. And that is the point. Worship not only takes our focus off of ourselves but it puts us in a place to discover or re-discover who Jesus is.

Worship isn’t about me or about you. It is about the one who has proven himself faithful over and over again, the one whose love is endless, unconditional, and all embracing of you and me. Worship is about him whose name is above every other name and so to find satisfaction in the life that is only in him. Worship is about God and only about God because it is in worship we realize that much of what we bring to the table to meet God is brokenness, worry, fear, and weakness. While our first inclination is to show God just the opposite, hiding frailty and showing strength - God wants us just the way we are - because God has a work he wants to do in us. Through the miracle of his Spirit in us, we find his strength, his grace, his mercy, his peace, his unconditional love, his kindness, his patience – and so become over powered. God takes us over and re-creates us in the moment,

shaping our heart and our mind – switching our perspective from ourselves to him who is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine – and so he gives us life. Worship reminds us of who Jesus is and brings us to him, drops us off at his feet so he can have his way with us.

When I was in college, I was invited to attend a bible study on my dorm floor that was led by a young gal whose witness to me was one of unconditional love and acceptance. I was not a Christian at the time but I knew that she was praying for me and I knew that every week she was going to faithfully invite me to her bible study. She was one of four people in my life at that time that God used to bring me to make a re-commitment to faith in Jesus Christ. I am not sure she ever really knew the impact she had on my life because I really didn't act on my faith in Jesus until after I graduated and had moved back to the city where I grew up. A few years later I got a call from her saying that she was going to be coming through the area where I was living and that it would be nice to visit. Much had changed in my life. I was married, was finishing seminary and was a new father. Our visit was not what I had expected though. In fact, I was surprised. This gal who had once been a pillar of faith for me had fallen away. A graduate degree, a boyfriend or two and a number of other circumstances had so filled her life that she hadn't attended a bible study, or a church since she was in college. Now she wasn't sure what she believed anymore. I was so surprised. It wasn't that she was against Jesus; it's just that she wasn't so much for him anymore. I encouraged her to get back into a church in her community and tried to model back to her the same unconditional love she had once showed me. It was so disappointing. There is no happy ending to this story. She had slowly fallen away and her faith had become lukewarm at best. But life can be like that, one choice at a time, one life event at a time. Slowly moving away from worship and the one who invites us to his side.

Sometimes, there are seasons of life when we fill our lives with all kinds of things that seem good and which we hope will satisfy but the reality is that they are not best. We have been created with a God-sized hole for worship and nothing satisfies, whether we realize it or not, nothing satisfies like Jesus. Each day we face a thousand different decisions and in each one we have the choice to seek Jesus and embrace all that he offers in life or not. Cleaning house and baking cookies is good – but when Jesus is in the house – it's not best. Why settle for anything less?

Abundant Life

In John 10:10 Jesus tells us that he has come to give us life and to give it to us abundantly. Yet there are many of us here this morning who may be wondering where this good life in Jesus is or if we had it, where it has gone. The Christian life for us may have become a bland and sometimes cold cup of coffee, or maybe a routine that we have fallen into, same place, same thing. We need a fresh taste, a rejuvenating life-bringing experience, a new start, a dance with Jesus. This is what I believe this message brings us this morning. Martha shows us that life is lost one distraction at a time. That it's all too easy to miss out on the opportunities that bring us a greater experience of Jesus' love, hope and peace.

Mary points us to the best choice - that when we worship we lose ourselves, one problem, one complaint at a time. Jesus waits for us this morning and invites us to draw near to him. When we do, we discover who he is. Everything else fades in comparison. But it's a choice. God gives us the capacity for the abundant life he wishes to give us, but we need to seek it; above all else, before all else, first things first.