
Why Are You So Worried and Distracted?

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A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

Many different sermons have been preached on this gospel passage. While driving back from vacation, my wife recalled a few of the ones I have given; and in her ever so gentle and loving way, let me know which one was the better sermon.

She said, "Why don't you preach that sermon about Martha representing "'action' and Mary "'contemplation' and how both are necessary in the spiritual life. "No," I responded. "Not feeling that one."

"Okay," she said. "Preach the sermon about the dynamics between Martha and Mary." I responded, "Wow, I forgot about that sermon. But honey, we just spent a week vacationing with my baby sister. I am not sure if it is in the cathedral's interest for me to preach about sibling dynamics."

"What are you going to preach about?" she asked. Without hesitating, I responded, "I am drawn to Jesus' words to Martha, and I am going to preach about those words:"

Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things ,

We are a distracted culture. Perhaps it is because we live in a world of instant communication where these [hold up cell phone] are on us all the time. We can call, text, email, upload to Facebook, Twitter or Instagram at any moment ... even during this sermon!

Web designers and technology experts realize tell us that we are a distracted culture. Website analytics reveal that we spend one minute on each webpage before we get distracted and click to another page. They have one minute to get their message across.

In seminary, one of my assignments in preaching class was to go home and watch TV. It was one of the few A's I got at Yale Divinity School! Our task was to study the length of the commercial breaks. Yes, networks know that if the commercial breaks go on too long (longer than 4-5 minutes) you and I will get distracted and change the channel. My preaching professor used that exercise to say you can write the greatest sermon in Christendom, but the challenge will be delivering that sermon to distracted culture.

You parents of teenagers know exactly what I am talking about. As I prepared for this sermon, I discovered that teenagers send or receive (on average) 3,339 text messages a month. That is six texts per every hour they are awake. Adults in their 20s-30s (my generation) send around 1,630 a month. That is three texts per every hour we are awake. These stats highlight how distracted we have become.

Many of you here this morning have spent years lecturing your children about the implications of drinking and driving. Now, the leading cause of death among teens is texting and driving!

How do we have conversations with our children about the seriousness of being distracted behind the wheel when so many of us model the same behavior? We spend our days worried and distracted!

I know what some of you are thinking, there is a difference between Martha's worries and our own. Martha is more concerned with the mess in the kitchen than spending time with the Messiah, who happens to be sitting in the family room. No wonder Jesus says what he says to her.

Given the context of this gospel, it certainly feels as though our worries and distractions have a little more significance than Martha's, and I would like to think Jesus wouldn't say those words to me or to you.

Certainly, Jesus would understand the worries and distractions that come with being Canon for Congregational Life.

Certainly, Jesus would understand the worries and distractions that come with owning a business or being self-employed.

Certainly, Jesus would understand the worries and distractions that come with being an associate, junior or partner in a prominent law firm.

Certainly, Jesus would understand the worries and distractions of being a mother of three children (with all the school projects and extra-curricular activities that come with that).

Certainly, Jesus would understand the worries and distractions of someone without a job, who is struggling to make their mortgage or pay their utilities.

Certainly, Jesus would understand the worries and distractions of someone who is struggling with an illness, or going through a divorce, or has recently lost a loved one.

It seems crazy to think that Jesus' words to Martha apply to our worries and distractions , But they do!

When I looked at today's gospel in the Greek, I discovered two things:

1. The Greek words used to describe Martha's "worries and distractions" mean "to have an agitated mind." Those words apply to our own worries and the distracted culture we live in. We have agitated minds!
2. The importance of what Martha is doing. The word used to describe her activity is diakonian (to serve); it is where we get the word deacon. Martha was worried and distracted because she was trying to serve Jesus. Her work was important work and something she was doing for our Lord!

Isn't it ironic that many of our worries and distractions are a result of serving God? God calls us to serve in particular jobs and vocations, and those jobs come with worries and distractions. God calls us to be a loving spouse to a specific person and that too comes with worries and distractions. God blesses us with children and grandchildren and they come with a whole bundle of worries and distractions. Thus, many of our worries and distractions are a result of the gifts God has placed in our lives.

That is why it is important to look at this text and pay attention to Jesus' response to Martha. Jesus isn't undermining Martha's work or concerns. Jesus simply says, "Mary has chosen the better." Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away."

What did Mary choose?

Mary "chose" to take a moment to disengage from the worries and distractions. Mary "chose" to take a moment "to be still before the Lord." Mary "chose" to take a moment to hear the Word of the Lord. And that choice is what Jesus commends.

We are to make Mary's choice our own. Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Evelyn Underhill, a 20th century Anglican spiritual writer, once wrote: "We mostly spend our lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do." She says, in the process, we forget the most "fundamental verb" of all, "to be", To be in relationship with God.

As a distracted culture, now more than ever, we need to find time in our days to unplug and to choose what Mary chose, to be with God , in silent prayer , reading/studying scripture , or in worship. As we see in this gospel text, it doesn't just happen; it is a choice we have to make in our daily lives.

Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better part. Mary takes a moment to disengage from the "to want, to have and to do" of this life in order "to be" with God. Personally, I have found that when I unplug, when I leave the worries and distractions for a few minutes and choose what Mary chose, my days are filled with a life-giving, life-sustaining, life-redeeming and life-transforming grace.

It is as though I am given a gift. It is a gift of grace, love, and the assurance that God's presence is with me that day. It is a gift that Jesus says, "will not be taken away." No worry or distraction can take it away.

Mary chose the better part. What will you choose?

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, amidst the worries and distractions of our lives, help us remember you are the King of Glory and King of Peace. Give us the strength to disconnect from our daily worries and distractions and choose to be in your presence seven whole days, not just one in seven. There in your presence, may our hearts praise you, raise you, and extol your Holy Name.
AMEN